

Frenchwoman who received first face transplant dies

September 6 2016

The world's first face transplant recipient, Frenchwoman Isabelle Dinoire, died in April "after a long illness", a hospital said Tuesday.

In 2005, at the age of 38, Dinoire received a graft comprising the nose, lips and chin of a brain-dead donor to replace parts of her face that had been mauled by her dog.

The hospital in Amiens, northern France, confirmed the death of "Mrs D., the first patient in the world to receive a face transplant".

The hospital said her death had been kept quiet to protect her family's privacy.

The ground-breaking operation had raised hopes around the world for victims with faces disfigured in accidents or assaults, with surgeons in the United States, Spain, China, Belgium, Poland and Turkey performing partial or full transplants since the ground-breaking surgery on Dinoire.

Risk of rejection

But the initial enthusiasm over the procedure has been tempered by a daunting risk that the patient's body will eventually reject the donor's tissue.

Le Figaro newspaper reported that Dinoire's body had rejected the

transplant last year "and she had lost part of the use of her lips".

The drugs that she had to take to prevent her body from rejecting the transplant left her susceptible to cancer, and two forms of cancer had developed, the report said.

Jean-Pierre Meningaud, of a team at a Paris hospital that has performed seven face transplants, told AFP: "All the patients we operated on have had reactions of rejection, which leads to higher doses of drugs, and with them, the risks."

He added that in addition to the risk of rejection a number of other problems can crop up including "grafts that age a little faster than (the patient), problems of (skin) colour, high blood pressure (and) mood."

Meningaud said that with Dinoire's death, "we should put these transplants on hold pending advances in immunology".

Dinoire gave a remarkable news conference in February 2006, just three months after the operation, when the blonde, blue-eyed mother of two appeared before a scrum of TV cameras.

She appeared to be wearing thick makeup to disguise the scars of the procedure and lips that were heavy and inflexible.

She spoke with a pronounced lisp but was otherwise comprehensible as she recounted how she had fainted after "taking medicines to forget" personal problems.

"When I woke up, I tried to light a cigarette and I couldn't understand why it didn't stay between my lips. Then I saw the pool of blood and the dog next to me," she said.

"I went to look in the mirror and was horrified."

But the ground-breaking operation gave her a new lease of life.

"Since my operation I have a face, like everyone... I will be able to resume a normal life," the divorcee said.

The operation was led by Jean-Michel Dubernard, a world-renowned surgeon at Edouard Herriot hospital in the eastern city of Lyon, and Bernard Devauchelle, a professor of facial surgery.

Dubernard had performed the world's first hand transplant in September 1998, followed by the first double hand and forearm transplant in January 2000.

The transplant team came under fire from within the French medical profession for releasing post-operation pictures of the patient.

At the time, a specialist in reconstructive surgery, Maurice Mimoun, recognised the emotional nature of the debate, noting the face's "relationship with the soul".

The first full face transplant was performed by a Spanish team in March 2010 on a man whose face was disfigured in an accident.

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