

UCLA is Home to the First Face Transplantation Program in Western America

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BY CHARLES POLADIAN | MAY 25, 2012 04:22 PM EDT

The University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) will become the first institution in the western United States to have a face transplantation program. The surgical procedure could give some people a new lease on life.



(Photo : Reuters) Richard Norris from Virginia had the most extensive face transplant so far.

The UCLA Health System will join a select few programs in America who offer face transplants. While not a common procedure, the surgery can provide individuals with facial disfiguration a chance to live a somewhat normal life.

Facial injuries can cause serious breathing, speaking and eating problems and inflict an emotion toll on the individual. A loss of identity, a sense of isolation and even depression can result from these injuries.

According to Dr. Reza Jarrahy, surgical co-director of the face transplantation program at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, "we hope that restoring facial form and

function will provide the opportunity for patients to lead productive lives that are not defined or hampered by facial appearance."

While face transplantation is an interesting and great surgical development there are still plenty of risks with the procedure. Drugs that suppress the immune system will be needed for the rest of the patient's life in order to prevent the body from rejecting the new face.

The surgery is also extremely labor intensive, taking anywhere from eight to 20 hours to finish. The surgeons have to remove all the damaged areas of the face before putting the donated face onto the patient. Every aspect of the face has to be secured to the skull and doctors have to carefully stitch together all the nerves and blood vessels of the patient to the new face.

UCLA is looking to conduct clinical trials for facial transplantations for qualified individuals. This will help the program understand the effectiveness of anti-rejection drugs as well as improve the actual surgical procedure.

America is one of the leading countries for face transplantations. Only 19 individuals globally have had a partial or full facial transplantation and six of those procedures were conducted in America. The procedures in America included [Richard Lee Norris](#) from Virginia who had the most extensive face transplant so far and three women at the [Brigham and Women's Hospital](#) in Boston.

UCLA's facial transplantation program will be a part of Operation Mend, in order to provide facial and hand reconstructive surgery to wounded soldiers. According to UCLA, approximately 200 soldiers have lost either a part of their face or their whole face. Fires at home are also a concern, with approximately 1,000 burn victims suffering from facial injuries.