

UCLA hospital now performing face transplants

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Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center is joining four other U.S. hospitals in offering face transplantation surgery, a complex procedure the Defense Department estimates could help up to 200 injured service members.

UCLA's program is the first on the West Coast, designed to help patients with varying degrees of disfigurement.

Fewer than 20 people worldwide have undergone complex full or partial face transplants; six have been conducted in the U.S.

UCLA, along with medical centers at the University of Maryland, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Cleveland Clinic and others, hopes to expand the numbers to help the estimated 1,200 people nationwide who could benefit, officials said.

"Our goal is to return a sense of normalcy to our patients' lives," said Dr. Reza Jarrahy, the program's surgical co-director.

DoD has figured prominently in developing the intricate procedures,

providing nearly \$250 million.

The U.S. recipients include James Maki, a Vietnam veteran who lost his nose, cheeks, upper lip and palate when he fell onto an electrified rail in a Boston subway, and Mitch Hunter, a former Army private from Indiana disfigured in a car accident in 2001.

Surgery restored sensation in both men's faces and restored their smiles; other procedures have returned patients' sense of smell, ability to eat regular food and breathe normally.

"The two components of this surgery are restoring form and function," Jarrahy said.

Since 2007, UCLA has managed Operation Mend, a charitable service that provides free reconstructive surgery to injured service members. The new program was borne of that service, said UCLA chief of reconstructive transplantation Dr. Kodi Azari.

"The real impetus for me to do this is for our wounded service members. It's an honor and privilege to be able to offer this," Azari said.

Candidates for face transplantation must meet strict requirements, including being in good health and between ages 18 and 60, and having a disfigurement not reparable by conventional surgery.

They also must endure long surgeries and extensive rehabilitation, Azari said.

Donor families also are needed for UCLA and the other hospitals that offer the rare procedure. The donations present a unique challenge for transplant counselors, who must convince families of the life-changing impact the donation has.

Part of UCLA's program includes giving handmade, life-like masks to donor families within a day or two, enabling them to hold open-casket funerals if desired, he added.

Face transplant surgeries cost between \$300,000 and \$1 million, depending on complexity. Setup for UCLA's program has been funded entirely through donations and will allow the university to offer the surgery free to patients. □