

New Transplants Are Changing Lives

(NAPS)—Organ transplants have been saving lives for many years. You may even know someone who has received a kidney or a heart transplant, and what a difference that gift of life has made.

Another type of transplant has been changing lives in incredible new ways—the transplantation of hands and faces. More than 100 people worldwide have received these types of transplants: a veteran who lost his limbs in war, a woman whose face was devastated in an attack, a child who lost his hands to severe infection. All have had their lives transformed.

These procedures are called “Vascularized Composite Allograft” organ transplants, or VCA transplants. They are composed of multiple types of tissue. With a hand transplant, for example, bones, blood vessels, nerves and skin must all be attached to the remaining arm.

So many tissues, however, make VCA transplants extremely complex. The surgery requires the involvement of dozens of surgeons and other medical professionals and can take 16 hours or more. Recovery is also demanding for patients; rehabilitation can be a full-time job for one to two years.

Yet, the results are life changing. VCA transplants can restore abilities and independence in ways that artificial limbs and reconstructive surgery cannot. Just consider the difference a working hand with moving fingers and a sense of touch could make. It can mean the ability to take care of oneself, work, drive and play. Face transplants enable recipients to rejoin society, often ending isolation and depression.

VCA and traditional organ transplants are the same in some



With a new type of transplant, people can now receive a restored face or hands that work.

respects. Criteria for matching donors and recipients include the need for compatible blood and tissue types. However, VCA requires matching for additional features such as skin tone, body size and hair color. Gender may also be taken into consideration.

A commonly asked question about face transplants is whether the recipient will look like the donor. The answer is yes and no. Yes, skin characteristics such as moles, freckles and scars will transfer to the recipient. However, because the recipient’s underlying bone structure is apt to be different from the donor’s, resemblance will likely be minimal.

Like with kidneys, livers and other organs, there is a national waiting list for VCA transplants that matches donors with potential recipients. However, enrolling as an organ donor on a state or national registry does not mean you’re authorizing VCA donation. Your family would make the decision about VCA donation after your death.

You can learn more at www.organdonor.gov, a website of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration.

Did You Know?

Organ transplants have been saving lives for years. It is important to note, however, that enrolling as an organ donor doesn’t provide authorization for hand or face donation. That’s given by surviving family. Learn more from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services at organdonor.gov and optn.transplant.hrsa.gov/resources/by-organ/vascular-composite-allograft/.

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