Sociological Considerations in Face Transplantation
I. Summerton1 and R.A. Agha2

1International University of Health Sciences, Munich, Germany
2Editor-in-Chief, International Journal of Surgery

Correspondence to: Ms Ivana Summerton, Admnistr. 5A, 81369 Munich, Germany

Barker et al’s thoughts on face transplantation were most interesting, thought provoking and controversial.1 Surgery is not a subject with whom one outside of the medical profession feels comfortable and facial surgery would certainly not be considered an after-dinner topic. It is for reasons of human discomfort with facial disfigurement that such developments are viewed as a leap as opposed to gradual progress. The 1996 Hollywood thriller—“Face Off”—depicts the “big screen” interpretation of face transplantation and its implications, but behind the science fiction and the directors camera there is an emerging reality which must be discussed by all sections of society.

Medical advances such as the donation and transplantation of organs are widely accepted practices in the majority of today’s societies. To date, those in need of organ transplants are dependent upon the organs of the deceased for what is ultimately a life saving (or “life giving”) operation. Because the purpose of the organ transplantation is to sustain life society finds it acceptable. But what exactly constitutes “life-saving”? As face transplantation becomes a reality this question will need to be answered. Is a face just another organ or is it more than that? Such an operation could be viewed by the masses as non-critical. However, one suffering from severe facial disfigurement might have a different view.

Face transplantation would indeed be a life altering experience for an individual with facial disfigurement. It could be considered as potentially life-saving by preventing suicide and even life-giving by increasing the individuals participation in society and potentially opening up new opportunities for them such as marriage, a better job going out to dinner without being stared at or ridiculed. There are many who suffer with diseases such as cancer, birth defects or potentially life-saving by preventing suicide and even life-giving by increasing the individuals participation in society and potentially opening up new opportunities for them such as marriage, a better job going out to dinner without being stared at or ridiculed. There are many who suffer with diseases such as cancer, birth defects or accidents. These are often random “events” or “processes” which are often not the patients fault but for which they are ridiculed and stared at by society following their operation or treatment which has led to a more permanent disfigurement—the management for which is often not satisfactory.

Our interpretation of what is acceptable comes from what we consider to be the norm within our environment. Humans have long since been fascinated with facial features be it disfigurement or beauty. Looking “normal” is the desire of anyone with a facial disfigurement as we are usually judged upon our appearance—“First impressions count”. For the majority facial disfigurement is not an issue we tackle on a daily basis and we would rather not address it. When we are faced with it we therefore do not know how to react—we either stare or look away. As a child we may recall being told by our mother “Don’t stare, it’s rude” as curiosity in the presence of someone with facial disfigurement takes hold, without realising its affects on the recipient. If one was to engage people with facial disfigurement in a ‘normal’ manner they may well say “it’s nice to be treated like everyone else for a change”. Facial disfigurement is very much a ‘living’ reality for many and a challenge they face...
Social exclusion, ridicule and depression become internalised as part of ‘life’ and everyday experiences which are hard for non-sufferers like us to comprehend. For such a person could facial transplantation simply be viewed as cosmetic? Because we place such importance on our physical appearance, particularly our faces, the decision to donate ones face is one that would require a great deal of thought. For some relatives the image of a faceless burial would be almost as painful as the loss itself, while others would see the donation of such a vital organ as giving some purpose to the death of a loved one by improving the life of another.

As technological developments continue numerous ethical issues will arise and need to be addressed through debate, broad consultation and consideration. However, it is important for society to empathise with those dealing with facial disfigurement and not to be prematurely dismissive of a procedure like face transplantation. As it is the reaction of society itself to those with facial disfigurement that leads to their willingness to accept the risks and uncertainties of the procedure over and above the certainty of living with facial disfigurement. Ultimately, face transplantation will be less effective if the recipient could be recognised as having had one. The same cycle of ridicule and felt anxiety would remain. It is important for society to change as well, just as ethnic, racial and religious diversity is accepted and indeed even embraced, we must all do more to educate ourselves and others about facial disfigurement and move towards greater acceptance of variation.

Conflicting Interests – None declared.

Reference