

Facing reconstruction

by Renny Craats

To many accident victims and cancer survivors, cosmetic surgery is the key to reclaiming their lives. The surgeons skilled in facial reconstruction make this happen for them. Good esthetic surgeons are often good reconstructive surgeons as well. But there are definitely differences.

"With cosmetic surgery, you're trying to enhance normal. With reconstructive surgery, you're trying to restore normal," says Dr. Greg Waslen, a Calgary plastic surgeon.

Achieving "normal" can be a daunting task, and something that is not always possible. While some patients expect to be transformed to exactly how they looked before, surgeons stress that it's not always that easy.

"No matter what we do, there is always some remaining evidence, although we try to minimize any residual deformity," says Dr. Dale C. Birdsell, clinical professor of plastic surgery and former head of plastic surgery for the University of Calgary and the Calgary Health Region.

In some cases, surgeons can reconstruct a patient's face and actually improve on the original appearance. But reconstruction varies from person to person, and restoring a patient to his or her pre-trauma appearance can be as simple as a minor scar revision surgery or as complex as a 12-hour procedure and follow-up surgeries.

"(In complex procedures) we usually rebreak facial bones and transfer soft tissue to fill out contour defects in the face," says Birdsell.

For some patients, reconstruction involves microvascular surgery, during which tissue from one part of the body (commonly the forearm, back, abdomen, groin or legs) is put into the face and kept alive by joining blood vessels and nerves under a microscope.

For others, osteointegrated implants can be used for patients not strong enough to handle traditional reconstructive surgery or who suffered severe damage.

"In very difficult cases when someone may have lost an entire nose, rather than reconstructing the nose, we can use a prosthesis for a nose," says Waslen.

These silicone implants are attached by secure osteointegrated screws, so



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RESTORATION IN PROGRESS: Cosmetic surgery is enhancement of normal features, but reconstructive surgery is trying to rebuild the normal.

there is no chance of them becoming dislodged. Then they are shaped and painted and the result is realistic fea-

tures that are essentially indistinguishable from natural ones.

"It's phenomenal stuff," says Waslen.