

# Face Transplantation: Someone Else's Face in the Mirror

In November of 2005, Isabelle Dinoir became the first recipient of an experimental procedure -- a face transplantation. Since that time, 11 other face transplantations have been performed and questions of identity, public acceptance and innovative surgery still remain.

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## Boston Med -- Bohdan Pomahac

On the final episode of *Boston Med* surgeon Bohdan Pomahac can be seen conducting the only second face transplantation ever performed in the United States. The series director Terence Wrong films the remarkable surgery and follows Pomahac around Brigham and Women's as a remarkable drama unfolds around them. While Pomahac had prepared for this innovative procedure for many years, it somehow becomes the right moment for a number of firsts to emerge within this historic city already with an amazing array of medical firsts. Within this show alone would occur the first New England face transplantation, the first time a face transplant donor is identified, the first time a donor's wife meets a recipient wearing her husband's face, and the first time two face transplant patients meet -- Isabelle Dinoir and James Maki.

A perfect storm is required and each player in this storm is intriguing and moving. Joseph Helfgot and his family are waiting for a heart to become available and when one does Wrong films the transplant team collecting the organ and bringing it back to the hospital. Like all transplant patients and their families, they are so grateful and feel full of hope. Sadly, Helfgot never wakes from his operation and his family is asked if they would like to donate not only his internal organs, but also his face. Susan Helfgot decides that her husband would want to help continue the tradition of organ donation and agrees for her husband's face to be used to replace another's. James Maki, a Vietnam veteran had gravely injured and lost his nose, lips, cheeks and surrounding bone structure after falling onto the third rail in a Boston subway station approximately 4 years earlier. After 10 operations Maki learned to live without a face, at least without one we could recognize as a face. Taunted by others he lives in isolation with his wife and daughter doing the best they can.

I first met Bo Pomahac after emailing him in the spring of 2008 asking if I could speak with him about face transplantation. I had hoped that I could simply talk with a surgeon who wished to perform the procedure, to learn more about the actual operation, but also just to talk about the topic with someone who understood it and with whom I could engage my thoughts on the subject. Only a handful of research and literature had been published to date and I think at some level I needed to be in the presence of somebody who know a lot about it, believed in it, and found it full of potential. Bo emailed me quickly back saying that it would be fine. In the writing of the book, I began to see some trends in some of these remarkable surgeons, sets of behaviors that would catapult them towards innovation and compassion and one of these traits, I believe, is a sense of openness and generosity.

After Maki's surgery, Dr. Pomahac hands him the mirror to survey his brand new face. Wrong is there to film what might be one of the most captivating scenes ever recorded by film. Just before the mirror is handed to Maki, Pomahac is asked what he thinks might happen. I knew from the medical literature we had discussed that studies had shown that the recipient would not look like their old selves, nor the donor -- that bone structure would play a large role in the way the new face looked. I had however wondered much about this during the writing of our book on the topic. I knew from Sander Gilman's work on identity and the nose, and from the literature on rhinoplasty, that we place a great value and meaning on noses and that a transplanted nose would always be the nose of the donor. I also wondered if the self was an entity that could be captured simply by having a face, maybe any face would complete that gap between the faceless and the faced. As Maki glanced into the mirror he first remarks on his nose, that he indeed has one. He then, after a few seconds of reflection, says that he can see his old self in there. At first the two statements do not seem to blend, he sees this new nose, one that marks the donor (later in the show Susan Helfgot meets Maki and says that she did not see her husband in the face except for his nose) yet he also feels like himself. Bo reflects upon this later and one can sense that he too is moved, that one can replace a face and an entire sense of selfhood in this one amazing act of face transplantation. "What else could one want," he poignantly remarks.

Towards the end of the episode, Bo sits in his house with his children looking at pictures of

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### Face Transplant Scholar

**Carla Bluhm, Ph.D.**  
College of Coastal Georgia,  
Brunswick, GA, United States

Dr. Bluhm is the co-author with Nathan Clendenin of the first book published on face transplantation called "Someone Else's Face in the Mirror: Identity and the New Science of Face Transplants" (Praeger Publishers, 2009).

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James Maki explaining how special Jim is as a patient. Yet what I caught was his "World's Greatest Dad" T-Shirt, perhaps a gift from his children that he chose to wear for filming that day. I think that is what makes him stand out, not just because he is now clearly a famed, history making, surgeon who conducted a face transplantation, but because he embodies traits such as the ability to blend sensitivity with celebrity and to balance compassion and conviction with a drive to doing what is right and fair.

Posted by Carla Bluhm, Ph.D. at 8:19 AM

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