

Yuba City man unveils new smile after face transplant

By ASSOCIATED PRESS

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Reporting from Yuba City —

A year and a half after a suicide attempt left his face horribly disfigured, a Yuba City man has had a successful facial transplant, and the lead surgeon estimates his face should be “pristine” in as little as three years.

Cameron Underwood, 26, had the 25-hour operation that involved more than 100 medical staff in January. Less than a year later, Underwood can speak intelligibly. He is golfing and has even gone skydiving, the Sacramento Bee reported Friday.

Underwood appeared Thursday at a news conference at New York City’s NYU Langone Health center, where he smiled and thanked medical staffers and his family for giving him a second chance at life.

“There have been so many amazing advances in surgery. I’m living proof of that. But it only happens because of special people like Will and his family,” Underwood said, referring to Will Fisher, his organ donor.

Before Underwood’s 2016 suicide attempt, he was employed as a welder and machine worker in Yuba City, according to family members quoted in a story this month in People magazine.

Underwood had struggled with depression since adolescence and shot himself after a day of drinking, disintegrating the bottom of his face.

With just 18 months between the initial injury and the surgery, Underwood’s procedure represented the shortest wait time for a face transplant in the U.S., said the lead surgeon, Dr. Eduardo Rodriguez.

“We’re able to take advantage of the most advanced technological procedures that exist, and we can do a lot of computerized planning before we do the operation,” Rodriguez said at Thursday’s news conference.

Rodriguez estimated about three to five years until Underwood's face is "pristine."

Underwood's body has shown no signs of rejecting the transplanted face, Rodriguez said.

"There was no way we could have ever taken him back to a normal life without a face transplant," the surgeon said.

Underwood still lives in Yuba City but must continue to travel monthly to New York City to see the surgeon.

Fewer than 50 face transplants have been performed worldwide, and fewer than 10 total or near-total operations have been performed in the U.S.