

Reconstructive Management of Devastating Electrical Injuries to the Face

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Background: Devastating fourth-degree electrical injuries to the face and head pose significant reconstructive challenges. To date, there have been few peer-reviewed articles in the literature that describe those reconstructive challenges. The authors present the largest case series to date that describes the management of these injuries, including the incorporation of face transplantation.

Methods: A retrospective case series was conducted of patients with devastating electrical injuries to the face who were managed at two level-1 trauma centers between 2007 and 2011. Data describing patient injuries, initial management, and reconstructive procedures were collected.

Results: Five patients with devastating electrical injuries to the face were reviewed. After initial stabilization and treatment of life-threatening injuries, all five underwent burn excision and microsurgical reconstruction using distant flaps. Two of the patients eventually underwent face transplantation. The authors describe differences in management between the two trauma centers, one of which had the availability for composite tissue allotransplantation; the other did not. Also described is how initial attempts at traditional reconstruction affected the eventual face transplantation.

Conclusions: The care of patients with complex electrical burns must be conducted in a multidisciplinary fashion. As with all other trauma, the initial priority should be management of the airway, breathing, and circulation. Additional considerations include cardiac arrhythmias and renal impairment attributable to myoglobinuria. Before embarking on aggressive reconstruction attempts, it is advisable to determine early whether the patient is a candidate for face transplantation in order to avoid antigen sensitization, loss of a reconstructive “lifeboat,” surgical plane disruption, and sacrifice of potential recipient vessels. (*Plast. Reconstr. Surg.* 136: 839, 2015.)

CLINICAL QUESTION/LEVEL OF EVIDENCE: Therapeutic, V.

Among the various types of burns, electrical burns tend to be some of the most severe.¹ The extent of injury is usually much more extensive than visible at the skin surface. Initial management is often complicated by cardiac arrhythmias, myoglobinuria, which leads to renal injury, and severe compartment swelling that requires fasciotomies.²⁻⁴ Fourth-degree electrical burns to the face are often fatal, which explains the dearth of articles that describe their reconstruction.¹

When an electric field is applied to part of the human body, water and other molecules oscillate, which generates heat. With a high enough

current, this can lead to DNA damage, free radical release, and coagulative necrosis of tissues.^{2,3}

The amount of heat generated in a specific tissue, and the resultant tissue damage, depend on the electrical resistance of that tissue. Heat energy generated (in joules) is proportional to resistance (in ohms) and to the square of the current (in amperes)³; therefore, tissues with higher resistance generate more heat. Different tissues have different resistance to electric current; nerves have the lowest resistance, followed by blood vessels, skin, tendons, and fat. Bone has the highest resistance.¹ As a result,

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Fig. 1. Patient 1. (Above, left) Initial appearance showing fourth-degree burns to the right midface and upper face. (Above, right) Patient 1 is shown after burn excision and right eye enucleation. Note the areas of necrotic bone at the superior orbital rim and zygoma, which were not fully débrided. (Below, left) A latissimus-serratus muscle flap was used, with the serratus portion used to obliterate right orbital dead space and to restore malar projection. (Below, right) The latissimus was used to cover all exposed structures on the right side of the face, followed by bilaminar neodermal template placement and staged split-thickness skin graft.

most of the heat is generated deep, along the bony cortical surface. This explains why deep tissue damage from high-voltage electrical injury (defined as $>1000\text{ V}$)¹ is usually much more extensive than the visible skin burn. This also explains the frequent occurrence of muscle damage with associated myoglobinuria, as well as compartment syndrome. This intense heat can even melt bone, which can present as osseous pearls on the bony surface.²⁻⁴

Vascular injuries are also common, especially with the alternating current found in power lines.^{2,4}

The elastin and collagen in the arterial walls are denatured, and intravascular thrombosis occurs. Massive edema can also occlude blood vessels.

The effects on muscles vary depending on the type of current. With direct current, there is a single prolonged tetanic contraction. Alternating current causes repetitive muscle contraction, which leads to strain and tears. Skeletal muscle can also be injured directly by heat, causing cell membrane rupture, myoglobinuria, myoglobin cast accumulation in the renal tubules, and renal ischemia.¹



Fig. 2. Patient 1 is shown at 7.5-year follow-up after composite serratus-latissimus muscle flap, bilaminar neodermis, and unmeshed split-thickness skin graft.

These extensive injuries and life-threatening complications are often present in patients with devastating electrical burns to the face. When those patients survive, they present a formidable reconstructive challenge. The primary goals of reconstruction are to (1) provide stable soft-tissue coverage to prevent exposure of vital structures, (2) restore facial function, including expression, mastication, eyelid closure, and sensation, and (3) restore facial appearance. Several rungs of the reconstructive ladder are typically used.^{5–7}

Traditional teaching in burn surgery includes early excision of all nonviable tissues, followed by wound coverage. This can be a challenging task in the face, where overaggressive débridement can be detrimental.

Soft-tissue reconstruction in the face can be performed via many different surgical methods. The development of vascularized composite tissue allotransplantation has revolutionized the field of facial reconstruction. Arno et al. previously described the use of vascularized composite tissue allotransplantation in extensive facial burn reconstruction.⁸ In this article, we present a series of five patients with devastating facial burns, the largest case series to date, that describes how they were managed successfully at two level-1 trauma centers, one with the availability of vascularized composite tissue allotransplantation and the other without. Their workups, management, and surgical course are described. The synergies and potential conflicts between traditional reconstructive methods

and vascularized composite tissue allotransplantation are described.

PATIENTS AND METHODS

We present a retrospective case series of patients with large (>30 percent), devastating electrical injuries to the face, managed between 2007 and 2011 at two level-1 trauma centers, one with the capability for vascularized composite tissue allotransplantation (institution 1) and the other without (institution 2). The patients' injuries, initial management, and reconstructive procedures are described.

RESULTS

Five patients with devastating electrical injuries to the face were treated at the two institutions between 2007 and 2011. They were all managed successfully and achieved the endpoint of stable soft-tissue coverage. Two of the patients went on to undergo vascularized composite tissue allotransplantation, and they achieved excellent cosmesis and restoration of some facial functions.

CASE REPORTS

Patient 1

Patient 1 was a 15-year-old healthy boy who sustained third-degree and fourth-degree electrical burns to the right side of his face and scalp after a motor vehicle collision in March of 2007. He was intubated at the scene and brought to institution 2 with a Glasgow coma scale score of 3T (Fig. 1, *above, left*). After initial resuscitation, he underwent excision of his facial burns on day 5, including his entire nasal soft-tissue coverage (cartilage was uninvolved), upper and lower eyelids, upper and lower lips, and right cheek. Excision of additional necrotic tissue was performed on day 10, down to healthy bleeding tissue. Burring of his right superior orbital rim, maxilla, and zygoma showed some areas of necrotic bone, which were conservatively débrided. He also underwent right eye enucleation (Fig. 1, *above, right*).

His reconstruction began with a free composite latissimus dorsi-serratus anterior muscle flap anastomosed to the ipsilateral superior thyroid vessels. The serratus muscle was used to fill the enucleated orbital cavity and to restore malar projection (Fig. 1, *below, left*), and the latissimus muscle was used to cover the remainder of the right face (Fig. 1, *below, right*). Meshed xenograft was initially used as temporary coverage. Seven days later, the xenograft was removed and replaced with bilaminar neodermis. The goal was to mimic the superior aesthetic qualities of a full-thickness skin graft, and to limit secondary graft contracture, without the donor site morbidity,⁶ given the large surface area and the lack of adequate donor site.

Four weeks later, after the use of topical silver-impregnated dressing to prevent infection of the bilaminar neodermis, a thin (8/1000ths of an inch), unmeshed split-thickness skin graft was used to reconstruct the epidermal layer after neovascularization of the underlying neodermis. Long-term results are shown in Figure 2, with expected muscle atrophy.

Long-term postoperative computed tomography scans have demonstrated no underlying bone necrosis or osteomyelitis.

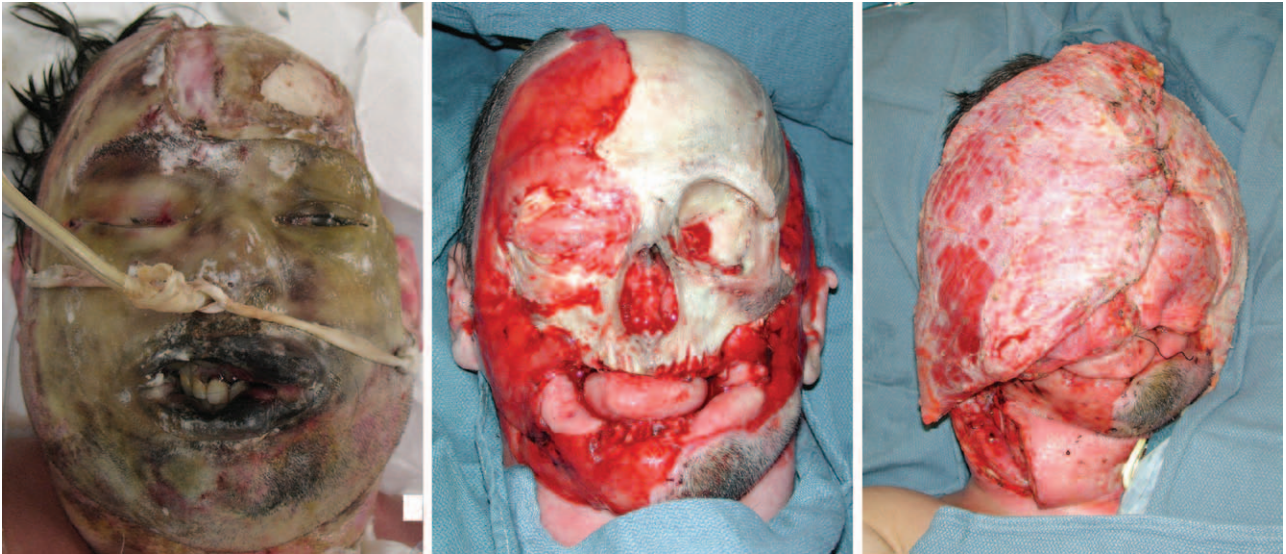


Fig. 3. Patient 2. (*Left*) Initial photograph showing fourth-degree burns to the entire face. (*Center*) Patient 2 is shown after burn excision. Note the necrotic bone on the left side of the face, which was not fully débrided. (*Right*) The patient is shown after bilateral composite serratus-latissimus muscle flaps.

In fact, a nuclear bone scan showed increased vascularity to the patient's affected ipsilateral hemicranium compared with the uninjured side and fully viable bone, which is interesting given that some of this bone had been found to be avascular intraoperatively.

Patient 2

Patient 2 was a 23-year-old man who sustained fourth-degree electrical burns to his face in 2008 after direct contact with a high-voltage power line while working on a cherry picker. He underwent emergency tracheostomy at another facility and then was brought to institution 2 with a Glasgow coma scale of 3T

(Fig. 3, *left*). He initially had acute kidney injury, which resolved with adequate resuscitation. He did not have rhabdomyolysis, arrhythmia, or other associated traumatic injuries. After resuscitation, he underwent burn excision on day 4. Bony viability was assessed using a burr, and the outer tables of the frontal, parietal, occipital bones, as well as the maxilla and zygoma, demonstrated no evidence of bleeding. Conservative bony débridement was performed. He also suffered devastating injuries to his bilateral eyes and underwent a left orbital enucleation, but with preservation of the right eye at his family's request, and a full mouth extraction due to nonviable dentition. Ultimately, he was left with full-thickness defects of the entire upper two-thirds of his face, along with a left hemiscalp defect with exposure of underlying necrotic bone (Fig. 3, *center*).

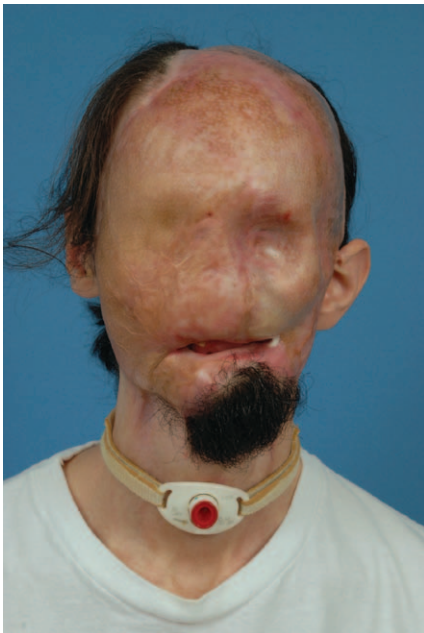


Fig. 4. Patient 2 at the conclusion of traditional reconstructive attempts with bilateral serratus-latissimus muscle flaps, bilaminate neodermis, and unmeshed split-thickness skin graft.



Fig. 5. Patient 2 is shown 3 years after full-face transplant.



Fig. 6. Patient 3. (Left) Initial photograph with fourth-degree burns to the left face and scalp. (Right) The patient is shown after burn excision. Note the necrotic temporal bone, which was not fully débrided.

He underwent bilateral free latissimus dorsi-serratus muscle flaps, covered with xenograft, followed by bilaminate neodermis and split-thickness skin grafting, similar to patient 1 (Fig. 3, right). Long-term results are shown in Figure 4, with expected muscle atrophy. His functional status at that point was limited, with persistent oral dryness, no facial motion, and limited ability to masticate.

The patient eventually became the first full-face transplant recipient in the United States. This was performed after he was transferred from institution 2 to institution 1. At that time, the revascularized neodermis and skin grafts were removed down to muscle, and the donor face was transplanted on top of the muscle bed, which was preserved as a “lifeboat” in case of transplant

failure. He has achieved improved oral competence and the ability to smile and masticate (Fig. 5). He has also developed good sensory two-point discrimination.

Patient 3

Patient 3 was a 51-year-old man who sustained fourth-degree burns to the left side of his face, left ear, and left scalp after contact with a high-voltage power line in July of 2010 (Fig. 6, left). He was brought to institution 1. His left facial nerve was among the structures that were injured. He underwent several débridements (Fig. 6, right), followed by a free rectus myocutaneous flap to the left face and scalp (Fig. 7). This was followed 4 months later by several operations aimed at compensating for his left facial nerve injury, including a brow lift, upper-lid gold weight insertion, and facial reanimation with an innervated free gracilis muscle flap coapted to the masseter nerve branch. He currently has a healed wound and is able to smile symmetrically.

Patient 4

Patient 4 was a 40-year-old man who sustained high-voltage electrical injury to the right side of his face after contact with a transformer in April of 2008 (Fig. 8, left). Shortly after arrival to institution 1, he was urgently taken to the operating room for tracheostomy, bilateral canthotomies, and upper extremity fasciotomies. He then underwent excision of his facial burns on days 5, 8, and 12, with right eye enucleation and very conservative débridement of the outer tables of his skull and of his facial bones (Fig. 8, center).

His facial reconstruction began on day 12, with a free omental flap to his face, covered with a meshed split-thickness skin graft (Fig. 8, right). This was chosen because of the large surface area that was involved. He has achieved the endpoint of a healed, stable wound (Fig. 9). He has not pursued further reconstructive steps.

Patient 5

Patient 5 was a 59-year-old man who sustained high-voltage midfacial fourth-degree burns after falling on a subway rail in June of 2005. He was brought to institution 1. He did not have associated life-threatening injuries. The patient underwent resection of

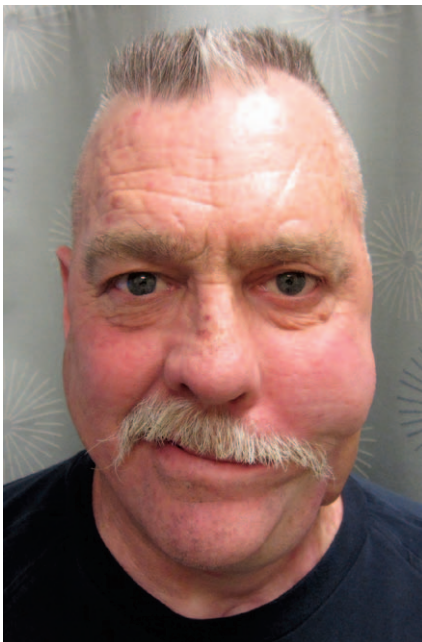


Fig. 7. Patient 3 after reconstruction with free rectus myocutaneous flap. He later underwent left facial reanimation with innervated free gracilis muscle flap (photograph not available).

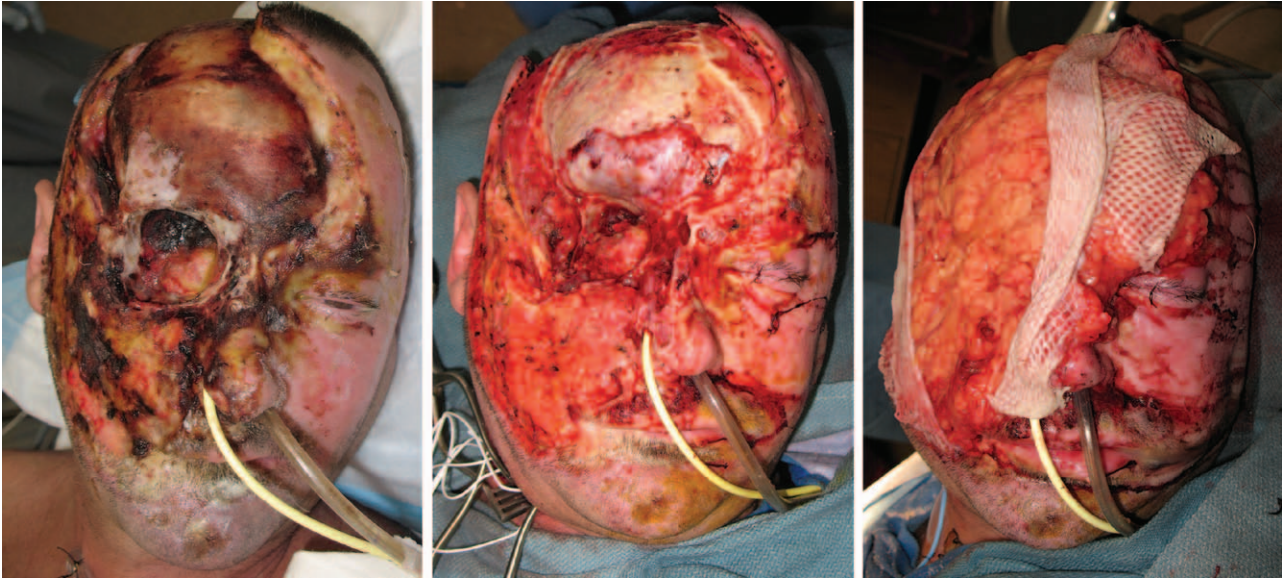


Fig. 8. Patient 4. (Left) Initial photograph showing fourth-degree burns to the right midface and upper face. (Center) The patient is shown after burn excision. Note the necrotic frontal bone, which was not fully débrided. (Right) The patient is shown after free omental flap and split-thickness skin graft.

midfacial structures, including the nose, upper lip, and maxilla (Fig. 10). Initial reconstruction was performed using a free anterolateral thigh flap that covered exposed structures and separated his oral cavity from his maxillary sinuses and nasal cavity (Fig. 11). He underwent several flap revisions in order to improve cosmesis, reduce bulk, and facilitate breathing. Ultimately, he underwent vascularized composite tissue allotransplantation in April of 2009, which dramatically improved his facial appearance and function (Fig. 12). He is now able to smile symmetrically, frown, and masticate. His two-point discrimination has improved significantly.

DISCUSSION

High-voltage, fourth-degree electrical burns to the face pose a significant challenge to reconstructive

surgeons, assuming the patient survives the initial devastating injuries. We present our initial management of those patients, as well as our reconstructive approach, which includes vascularized composite tissue allotransplantation.

Initial management should follow the Advanced Trauma Life Support and the American Burn Association algorithms, given that at least 15 percent of patients who sustain electrical burns will have associated traumatic injuries.¹ Life-threatening injuries, such as intracranial hemorrhage, cervical spine injury, compartment syndrome, rhabdomyolysis, and cardiac arrhythmias must be ruled out.^{1,9} The burn surface area is often underestimated in electrical burns because of the depth of the injury.

After the patient is stabilized and adequately resuscitated, the reconstructive process may begin. The initial operations are similar to those of any other burn patient, including early operative excision of nonviable tissue. Initial débridement can be conservative as the zone of injury delineates itself, since the face has a relatively robust blood supply. Therefore, only clearly necrotic tissue (zone of coagulation) should be excised, and marginal tissue (zone of stasis) should be preserved. At least two débridements are usually necessary. The first débridement is performed as soon as possible after the patient is stabilized. A period of 72 to 96 hours is then necessary to allow the burn injury to evolve and the nonviable tissue to demarcate. A second débridement is then performed, and additional débridements are performed every



Fig. 9. Final photograph of patient 4.



Fig. 10. Initial photograph of patient 5 showing fourth-degree burns to the midface.



Fig. 12. Patient 5 after partial face transplant.



Fig. 11. Patient 5 after reconstruction with a free anterolateral thigh flap to separate oral and nasal cavities.

72 to 96 hours if necessary until only “red, yellow, and white” healthy tissues remain.

One critical question is how full-thickness bony injury should be treated. Bone viability can be assessed preoperatively, using gadolinium-enhanced magnetic resonance imaging,^{1,10,11} or intraoperatively, by burring back to healthy bleeding bone. We have found preoperative magnetic resonance imaging to be of little use in cases in which surgical intervention is being planned

anyway because visualization of bony bleeding is the accepted-standard diagnostic method for bony viability. In cases in which no bleeding from the burred bone is observed, the surgeon should resist the temptation to perform full bony débridement because this is often not possible without exposing vital structures, such as the brain and dural sinuses, and can have devastating complications, such as meningitis, dural tears, cerebrospinal fluid leaks, and bleeding from the dural sinuses.¹⁰ Full débridement is also probably unnecessary. It has been previously shown that devitalized skull bone does not need to be excised if it is covered with well-vascularized soft tissue,¹² because it serves as an osteoconductive scaffold for new bone regeneration,¹³ and a well-vascularized soft-tissue flap allows it to resist infection.¹⁴ In our experience, we have found that conservative burring of the bone to remove the outer cortex and expose the cancellous layer, followed by immediate vascularized muscle flap coverage, usually results in a successful reconstruction, as demonstrated by the absence of subsequent sequelae of osteomyelitis, as well as confirmation of bony viability on the nuclear scan of patient 1.

Free tissue transfer is currently the mainstay of initial reconstruction in patients with large electrical injuries to the face. Microvascular anastomoses need to be performed outside the zone of injury, usually in the neck.¹⁵ In addition to bringing a new blood supply that helps resuscitate necrotic bone and resist infection, flaps prevent exposure of

vital structures and serve a functional purpose by allowing separation of the oral and nasal cavities (as in patient 5) or by providing facial reanimation (as in patient 3). In particular, muscle flaps tend to atrophy and contour nicely to the underlying bony framework, as seen in patients 1 and 2.

Although traditional microsurgical reconstructive methods fulfill the goal of coverage of exposed vital structures, they are often unable to restore a cosmetic appearance that resembles a “normal” face, as seen in patients 1, 2, 4, and 5. The vast majority of patients require multiple revisions.¹⁶ With the introduction and early successes of vascularized composite tissue allotransplantation, we are entering a new era in reconstructive surgery, which presents both exciting opportunities and significant challenges. As seen in patients 2 and 5, vascularized composite tissue allotransplantation allows, in one operation, the restoration of facial appearance and function that approach normal much more so than traditional microsurgical flaps.

Institution 2 does not currently have capability for vascularized composite tissue allotransplantation, whereas institution 1 does. Nevertheless, the current first-line option at both institutions is conventional microsurgical reconstruction. The current scarcity of face transplant donors makes it difficult to perform vascularized composite tissue allotransplantation as a first line. However, there are significant differences in how conventional microsurgical techniques are used at the two institutions. At institution 2, conventional techniques are performed as definitive reconstructions. Therefore, muscle flaps are often chosen because they atrophy and conform to the underlying skeleton. To resurface those muscle flaps with pliable skin, bilaminar neodermis covered with thin split-thickness autograft is used. Meshed xenograft is used as temporary coverage initially, as shown in patients 1 and 2, because it is inexpensive and does not require a valuable autograft donor site in case the flap is compromised.

In contrast, at institution 1, conventional techniques are often performed as a bridge to definitive vascularized composite tissue allotransplantation while awaiting a donor, or to fulfill certain functions, such as facial animation (patient 3), or separation of oral and nasal cavities (patient 5).

Therefore, currently, most patients with devastating facial injuries undergo a traditional microsurgical reconstruction as an initial reconstructive step, before they potentially undergo vascularized composite tissue allotransplantation. There are synergies, as well as potential conflicts, between

traditional reconstruction and vascularized composite tissue allotransplantation.¹⁶ In the case of patient 2, successful vascularized composite tissue allotransplantation was eventually performed, although finding a suitable donor was difficult because of antibodies that the patient had developed as a result of multiple previous transfusions, which were required in the course of his initial traditional reconstruction. On the other hand, the underlying muscle flaps would have served as a lifeboat if the face transplant had failed because they would have prevented exposure of vital structures.¹⁷ It is unclear whether placement of xenograft at the initial reconstruction had a role in antigen sensitization in patient 2.

Interestingly, previous authors have found that for patients with devastating facial injuries, the cost of vascularized composite tissue allotransplantation is comparable to the combined cost of numerous conventional reconstructive procedures.¹⁸ Despite that, conventional microsurgical reconstructive methods remain the first line. As more centers in the United States develop vascularized composite tissue allotransplantation programs, this paradigm may need to be shifted, and the reconstructive ladder may need to be modified. In particular, initial attempts at reconstruction should not impair eventual vascularized composite tissue allotransplantation. Perhaps the compromise at this time should be that in a patient who may be suitable for vascularized composite tissue allotransplantation in the future, initial reconstructive endeavors should be undertaken as a bridge to allotransplantation, aiming simply at covering exposed vital structures without subjecting the patient to long operative times and multiple transfusions, which may induce antigen sensitization.

One limitation of our case series is its small size, as it describes how we have managed what is, fortunately, a rare injury. Moreover, very few patients who sustain this injury survive to undergo reconstruction. In order to compensate for the small numbers of patients, we have combined the experiences of two trauma centers. A quantitative comparison of the outcomes of the two institutions is difficult, but we can nonetheless report some valuable lessons learned from our experience managing those devastating injuries.

CONCLUSIONS

The management of fourth-degree electrical burn injuries to the face poses a significant challenge that requires a multidisciplinary approach

during both the initial resuscitation and the multiple reconstructive operations. We report our case series of patients with devastating electrical injuries to the face, outlining their initial reconstructive management and ultimate results. The reconstructive process is complex and requires reconstructive surgeons to use all the tools in their arsenal. We describe some reconstructive pitfalls that we have encountered, such as antigen sensitization. The current paradigm is for patients to undergo traditional microsurgical reconstruction before being considered for vascularized composite tissue allotransplantation, but this may no longer be the case in the near future as more donors become available.

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PATIENT CONSENT

Patients provided written consent for the use of their images.

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