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Face surgery research unit opens

The world's first clinical research centre devoted to facial surgery is opening in London on Thursday.



Barbara Alves: "People need to look at us for who we are, not how we look"

The centre, set up by the Facial Surgery Research Foundation, will coordinate studies into oral cancers and facial injuries and deformities.

It will bring together 40 UK surgeons, plus researchers and statisticians.

Surgeon Iain Hutchison, who is leading the centre, says he hopes its research will mean better treatments can be developed for patients more quickly.

Oral cancer is the sixth most common cancer in the world. It is almost as common in the UK as leukaemia and melanoma and its incidence is twice that of cervical cancer.

Another significant part of the surgeons' work involves caring for patients injured after binge drinking, either by falling or by fighting.

Around 125,000 teenagers in the UK are affected by severe facial injuries after drinking every year and surgery is needed to correct the facial disfigurement of over 4,000 young people.

“ We hope to eliminate the inconsistencies in treatment ”

Iain Hutchison

'He kept kicking me in the face'

Specialists also plan to carry out research into the psychological effects of having a facial injury.

Although the centre will start by focussing research studies in the UK, it is hoped it can take part in international research projects within two or three years.

Mr Hutchison, a consultant in oral and maxillofacial surgery at St Bartholomew's Hospital in London, said: "The face is central to how we are judged and how we feel about ourselves.

"People with facial disorders not only have to cope with the fear generated by their illness, but also the dramatic effect that treatment will have on their appearance, speech and ability to eat."

Faster results

Two preventative studies aimed at demonstrating the risk of mouth cancers from smoking and drinking to young people are already planned.

Initial work has found that showing teenagers images of mouth cancers deters them from smoking.



A portrait of one of Mr Hutchison's patients by artist Mark Gilbert

Each of the 40 surgeons would go into a school and give an illustrated talk on mouth cancers. Children in another 40 schools in the same areas would be shown a video. A third group would be given no information.

The children would then be followed for over two years to see if the talks or video had any effect on smoking rates.

A similar study where surgeons would look at the most effective way of warning teenagers of the dangers of facial injuries while drinking.

Mr Hutchison said that, currently, individual surgeons might have to spend many years recruiting enough patients to carry out studies into how best to treat conditions.

He told BBC News Online: "This centre will be a unique research source. It is the first of its kind in the world.

"We hope to eliminate the inconsistencies in treatment. These inconsistencies affect patient's lives."

He said the mouth cancer cure rate among the surgeons involved in the centre was significantly higher than the national average, suggesting improvements could be made.

Barbara Alves, a patient treated by Mr Hutchison, told the BBC it was important others looked beyond someone's facial injury.

"We're all people. Other people need to look at us for who we are, not just how we look."

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