

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63332/joph.v5i6.2533>

Optimization of Outcomes in Post-Traumatic Facial Reconstruction Surgery: Comparative Analysis of Graft Techniques and Biocompatible Prosthetic Materials

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Abstract

Reconstructing the human aspect in post-traumatic facial reconstruction is one of the most difficult jobs in plastic and maxillofacial surgery. It offers a wide spectrum of approaches in the attempt to restore facial functionality and aesthetics. This article focuses on the difference in outcomes between autologous grafts and biocompatible prosthetic materials in facial reconstructive surgeries. A review of recently published clinical case reports and randomised controlled trials from 2018 to 2023 was conducted. It turned out that long-term autografts produced superior functional and aesthetic results, and prosthetic materials allowed for faster recovery with fewer initial surgical complications. The clinical implications of such findings are discussed.

Keywords: Facial Reconstruction, Autologous Grafts, Biocompatible Materials, Post-Traumatic Surgery, Surgical Optimization.

Introduction

Post-traumatic facial reconstruction is a very complex area in the field of plastic and maxillofacial surgery, as it aims to restore, in addition to the normal orofacial functions of the affected facial structures, an appearance aesthetic enough for the social and psychological reintegration of the patient into society. Injuries to the face can be caused by motor vehicle accidents, physical assaults, falls, and other similar events that involve an impact that results in severe damage to soft tissues, bones, and cartilage. That is why this type of injury, in general, requires an interdisciplinary approach, advanced surgeries, use of biomaterials and comprehensive rehabilitation.

The reconstruction techniques available today are broadly divided into those that use autologous grafts and those that use biocompatible prosthetic material. For example, autologous grafts extracted from the patient himself, in the form of iliac crest bone graft or cartilaginous rib grafts, have been particularly effective as they exhibit natural incorporation and therefore have a low risk of immune rejection. However, they are longer procedures and have greater technical complexity, with greater risks related to the donor area, such as infection and chronic pain.

On the other hand, biocompatible prosthetic materials such as titanium, hydroxyapatite and state-of-the-art polymers have become very attractive alternatives due to their immediate availability, ease of modelling and reduced operating time. These, therefore, are likely to allow for a faster primary recovery, but confer long-term complications in the form of implant-associated

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infections, dislocations, and the need for revision procedures. According to Smith et al. Despite growing popularity at a remarkable rate, currently, the literature is still debating much of whether this procedure is equally effective as autologous grafts for functional, aesthetic outcomes and patient satisfaction.

For example, the development of 3D printing allows customization in the design of implants and hybrid biomaterials, which further increased the possibilities in this area for a higher degree of precision in reconstruction and better postoperative experiences for patients after the reconstruction surgery process. However, the implementation of this technology faces its own challenges, particularly related to cost and accessibility in health systems with low-resource settings.

The aim of this article is to compare the results of autologous grafting techniques with those of biocompatible prosthetic materials in post-traumatic facial reconstruction surgery, evaluating the effectiveness in terms of function, aesthetics, complications and patient satisfaction. The net effect is an analysis that seeks to provide evidence-based guidance for the optimization of clinical decisions towards an improvement in surgical outcomes in this critical area of reconstructive medicine.

Theoretical Framework

Post-traumatic facial reconstruction is a multidisciplinary field that has expanded significantly with the rise of biomaterials, surgical techniques, and diagnostic technologies. This article discusses the basic principles on the use of autologous grafts and biocompatible prosthetic materials with recent evidence.

1. Autologous Grafts

Autologous grafting is considered the gold standard in facial reconstruction, is biocompatible, and adheres to surrounding tissues. Examples of autologous grafts are:

- **Bone:** It is frequently obtained from the iliac crest, fibula or cranial shell. It is ideal for mandibular or maxillary reconstructions (Kumar et al., 2020).
- **Cartilage:** It can be taken for the reconstruction of structures, for example, the nose or ear, the nasal septum or ribs (González et al., 2021).
- **Soft tissue defects:** Microsurgical flaps can be used to cover defects and, when necessary, to bring large amounts of vascularized soft tissue to the reconstructed area (Lee et al., 2022).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Autologous Grafts

Advantages	Disadvantages
High integration and biocompatibility	Possibility of complications in the donor area
Very low rate of immune rejection	Extended surgical times
Better functional and cosmetic results	Additional pain and scarring in the donor area

2. Biocompatible Prosthetic Materials

Prosthetic materials have become increasingly important in face reconstruction due to the versatility and ease of their application in this new era. Some of the most common materials are:

- **Titanium:** Strong and biocompatible, generally used as bone implants (Smith et al., 2019).
- **Hydroxyapatite:** A ceramic that mimics the composition of bone tissue and is applicable to bone defects and implant coatings (Ahmed et al., 2021).
- **Advanced polymers:** Materials such as porous polyethylene are offering the ability to individualize in complex defects (Kumar et al., 2020).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Prosthetic Materials

Advantages	Disadvantages
Faster recovery	Higher infection rate
Available immediately	Possible displacement of the implant
Exact modelling, e.g. using 3D printing	Less adherence to adjacent tissues.

3. Technological Advancements

The field of facial reconstruction has undergone a revolution with the emergence of technologies such as three-dimensional printing and nanotechnology, which have made it possible to manufacture custom-designed implants that are optimally adapted to the patient's structures (Ahmed et al., 2021). In addition, tissue engineering has opened up new possibilities for the development of cell matrices, which join autologous grafts with prosthetic materials to improve functional and aesthetic outcome (Lee et al., 2022).

Comparison of Technologies in Facial Reconstruction

Technology	Application	Main benefit
3D printing	Custom implant design	Contributes to accuracy and minimization of complications
Nanotechnology	Improved cell integration	Reduced risk of rejection
Tissue Engineering	Hybrid Matrix Development	Combines biocompatibility with personalization

4. Clinical Factors in the Selection of Techniques

This selection depends on a number of factors, such as the extent of the defect, the patient's medical condition, the availability of resources, and the surgeon's personal preference. Another point in the line of costs that these imply is the role that these costs play in systems with limited resources (Smith et al., 2019).

5. Future Prospects

In fact, it is only at this point that research into hybrid biomaterials, which combine the best of autologous grafts and prosthetic material, will finally make it possible to find much more effective solutions. Artificial intelligence in surgical planning promises to achieve greater precision and personalization of procedures (Ahmed et al., 2021).

Methodology

The design of this study was a retrospective comparative analysis based on a systematic review of the current peer-reviewed literature on the effectiveness of ear reconstruction. The research was also strengthened by a meta-analysis based on the number of functional, aesthetic and

surgical complications produced by the data. The steps of the methodology that this study used include:

1. Study design

This involved a combination of published observational studies, randomized controlled trials, and systematic reviews, all from the year 2018 to 2023. The selection criteria ensured that the investigations included a direct comparison between the use of autologous grafts with prosthetic materials in post-traumatic facial reconstruction.

2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

- **Inclusion criteria:**

- Studies in English or Spanish published between 2018 and 2023.
- Research studies conducted specifically on facial reconstructive surgery in adult patients.
- Functional and aesthetic outcomes and postoperative complications were evaluated in articles.

- **Exclusion criteria:**

- Studies that did not report quantitative data
- Paediatric cases or facial reconstruction due to oncological causes.
- Duplicate research or with abysmally poor methodological standards.

3. Search strategy

The work is represented by a literature search in academic databases, including PubMed, Scopus and Web of Science, using keywords related to the subject of the study such as "post-traumatic facial reconstruction", "autologous grafts" and "biocompatible materials".

Database	Search terms	Initial results
PubMed	"facial reconstruction" AND "autografts" AND "implants"	145
Scopus	"post-traumatic facial surgery" AND "biomaterials"	102
Web of Science	"reconstruction techniques" AND "biocompatible materials"	89

Table 1. Database Search Strategy

The search yielded a total of 336 articles. After the removal of duplicates and the application of the quality criteria, 45 articles were selected for full review and met the inclusion criteria.

4. Study variables

Four main variables were defined for the analysis:

- **Function:** Assessed using standardized scales for jaw function, chewing, and breathing
- **Aesthetics:** Measured by postoperative photographic analysis and patient satisfaction scores.

- **Postoperative complications:** These were all kinds of infections, graft rejections, and implant dislocations.
- **Patient satisfaction:** Assessed by means of a standardized questionnaire.

Variable	Evaluation method	Scale used
Functionality	Clinical tests (chewing, breathing)	Glasgow-FM scale
Aesthetics	Satisfaction surveys + photo analysis	FACE-Q Scale
Complications	Adverse Event Registry	Incidence Percentage
Patient satisfaction	Standardized surveys	Likert (1-5)

Table 2. Analysis Variables and Evaluation Methods

5. Statistical Analysis

Descriptive and comparative statistics were used for data analysis, while thematic analysis was applied for qualitative data analysis. Descriptive statistics tests the level of significance by the following statistical tests:

- **Student's t-test:** To compare measures between groups (autologous grafts vs. prosthetic materials).
- **Analysis of variance (ANOVA):** To measure significant differences between subgroups defined by type of technique used.
- **Software used:** Version 27 of the SPSS software was used for the analysis, where a value of $p < 0.05$ was taken as statistically significant (Lee et al., 2022).

Technique used	Average Functionality (%)	Complications (%)	Patient satisfaction (%)
Autologous grafts	90.3 ± 4.2	12.1	85.7
Prosthetic Materials	81.2 ± 5.5	21.8	73.9
P value	< 0.05	< 0.05	< 0.05

Table 3. Results of The Statistical Analysis

6. Validation and Reliability

We performed an assessment of potential risk of bias using the Cochrane assessment tool for accepted studies. The data were also reviewed by two independent researchers to maintain the reliability of the results.

Results

Comparison of the use of autologous grafts with biocompatible prosthetic materials showed significant differences in both functional and aesthetic applicability, postoperative complications, and patient satisfaction. The main results obtained are presented below, organized by each variable analyzed.

1. Functionality

Autologous grafts performed much better in the long-term functionality of free flaps, especially in those patients with a complex lesion who needed to restore chewing, breathing, and speech function. The mean functional score was 90.3% for autologous grafts and 81.2% for prosthetic materials ($P < 0.05$) when the Glasgow-FM scale was accessed.

Technique used	Initial functionality (%)	12-month functionality (%)	P value
Autologous grafts	83.5 ± 5.2	90.3 ± 4.2	< 0.05
Prosthetic Materials	85.1 ± 6.3	81.2 ± 5.5	< 0.05

Table 1. Post-Op Functionality Comparison

These results confirm the superiority of autologous grafts in functional integration with the patient's native structures (Kumar et al., 2020).

2. Aesthetics

Participants who received autografts had a higher mean aesthetic satisfaction score of 85.7/100, compared to 73.9/100 for prosthetic materials (Ahmed et al., 2021). This is due to the superior anatomical and dynamic conformity of autologous grafts.

Technique used	Average FACE-Q score	Confidence interval (95%)
Autologous grafts	85.7 ± 4.8	81.2 - 89.6
Prosthetic Materials	73.9 ± 6.1	69.0 - 78.8

Table 2. Aesthetic Satisfaction According To The Technique Used

Aesthetic perception was particularly relevant in young patients, who prioritized natural and long-lasting results (Lee et al., 2022).

3. Postoperative Complications

Prosthetic materials and autografts have a higher rate of 21.8% and 12.1%, respectively, in terms of complications (Smith et al., 2019). Complications of prosthetic materials were mainly dominated by infections with 8.7% and implant displacement with 6.4%, while local complications of autografts, such as wound infections with 4.2% and chronic pain with 3.1%, were the ones that predominated.

Complication	Autologous grafts (%)	Prosthetic Materials (%)
Local infection	4.2	8.7
Chronic pain	3.1	-
Displacement of the implant	-	6.4
Total	12.1	21.8

Table 3. Types of Postoperative Complications

4. Patient satisfaction

Overall, higher total satisfaction was reported in patients treated with autologous grafts, 85.7%, compared to 73.9% in patients treated with prosthetic materials (Ahmed et al., 2021). Contributing to satisfaction is the perceived naturalness, the absence of major complications and the restoration of function.

Technique used	Average satisfaction (%)	P value
Autologous grafts	85.7 ± 5.3	< 0.05
Prosthetic Materials	73.9 ± 6.8	< 0.05

Table 4. Overall Satisfaction According To Technique

Overview

Autografts continued to be superior to biocompatible prosthetic materials in both functional and aesthetic aspects. The only drawback was complications in the donor area. On the other hand, biocompatible prosthetic materials had better initial recovery rates, but, over time, showed high rates of long-term complications associated with it (Smith et al., 2019).

These findings emphasize the importance of personalized selection of techniques based on patient characteristics, type of injury, and specific surgical goals. (Ahmed et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2022).

Conclusions

Through this comparative analysis of the benefits and limitations that can be expected from each approach, the benefits and limitations that could be expected from autografts and biocompatible prosthetic materials in post-traumatic facial reconstruction are presented. Therefore, these findings have made it possible to realize that either technique has its significant merits, depending on the clinical context in question, although in most cases, autografts tend to stand out more due to their natural integration and long-term results.

1. Superiority of Autologous Grafts

The autografts revealed better integration with the surrounding tissues and thus provide better long-term scores for functionality and aesthetics. In addition, they have a low rate of immune rejection and are therefore optimal for patients with complex lesions when treatment focuses on functional restoration (Kumar et al., 2020). However, such benefits are weighed against some associated challenges, including complications that may result from the donor site, as well as increasing the duration of the operation for a patient (Ahmed et al., 2021).

2. Application of Biocompatible Prosthetic Materials

Prosthetic materials emerged as a fairly valid alternative, particularly in situations of rapid recovery or in patients unsuitable for the use of an autologous graft. With their easy availability and easy modeling, especially with the advent of 3D printing technologies, they become attractive options in low-resource environments (Smith et al., 2019). However, the disadvantage of these is that a higher incidence of long-term complications, including infection and dislocation, is observed, which motivates more frequent postoperative follow-up for the possibility of surgical revision (Lee et al., 2022).

3. Importance of Personalization

This provides further evidence that individual characteristics of each patient, including extent of injury, comorbidities, and even personal preferences, should play a role in personalized technique selection. Tissue engineering and 3D printing technologies have evolved at a rapid pace and are now reaching a point where this approach is viable (Ahmed et al., 2021).

4. Relevance of Future Research

In addition, the results indicate the need for further research to evaluate new generations of hybrid biomaterials and surgical techniques that combine the biocompatibility and durability of autografts with the access and ease of prosthetic materials. Other recommendations include examining strategies aimed at reducing donor site complications and, for example, the use of grafts augmented by tissue engineering. (González et al., 2021).

5. Impact on Clinical Practice

This study provides very important information in the field of clinical practice, offering evidence-based guidance, which can allow surgeons to make much more informed decisions that improve surgical outcomes. Autologous grafting should be the first line of treatment in young patients and in patients for whom functional and cosmetic demands are high, while the use of prosthetic materials is preferable in situations where rapid recovery is paramount or in patients with anatomical or medical limitations (Smith et al., 2019).

Taking into account the particularities of each specific case, the choice between autologous grafts and biocompatible prosthetic material must be individualized, as well as be up to current technological advances. In fact, the integration of both techniques using modern tools, such as AI-assisted planning, is likely to change the field of post-traumatic facial reconstruction in the coming years. (Ahmed et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2022).

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