

# I beat facial paralysis

*now I can smile again*

Surrey artist Vivvy Butler (61) was left with facial paralysis after a life-saving op, but pioneering surgery brought back her looks and confidence

As told to **Claire Williams**

**M**y heart sank when I saw myself in a shop window. I felt a freak because my face drooped awkwardly to one side, one of my eyes couldn't close and my mouth looked painfully twisted. It upset me terribly, especially as my son Toby (34) had announced that he and his partner Anna (33) were planning to marry. I couldn't bear the thought of looking like that in the wedding photos.

I hadn't always looked this way. It began after I started to lose my hearing in one ear and suffer headaches. I had no idea what was wrong and when my doctor sent me for an MRI scan I was shocked by the results. He told me I had a tumour sitting between my inner ear and brain stem. Luckily the tumour wasn't malignant, but I had to endure a complicated operation to remove it. I was told the operation might leave me with facial problems as the tumour was pressing against the facial nerve, but that these should only last a few months.

The first time I looked in the mirror after the operation I was horrified. My husband David (62), a company director, couldn't have been more supportive, but I thought I looked awful. Obviously I was relieved that everything had gone well, but I desperately hoped my face would return to normal. I followed the facial exercises I was given, but still couldn't smile properly.

I tried to get on with things, but if someone was walking towards me in the street I just wanted the ground to swallow me up. I covered my face with

scarves or put my hair over my face every time I went out. I hated smiling because my mouth looked so strange and I'd always cover a grin with my hand.

## Pioneering surgery

After six years of suffering I'd had enough, and when my son announced he was getting married I decided I had to do something. I'd always said that I wouldn't go to one of my children's weddings looking the way I did.

I spoke to my physiotherapist about my options and she told me about a surgeon called Mr Nduka who was performing a new operation with excellent results. I was wary about more surgery, but knew it was my only chance to look normal again.

The operation involved moving the temporalis muscle (which normally helps to operate the jawbone) to my cheek to improve movement to my mouth and give my face a more balanced look. Because the jawbone is operated by more than

one muscle, moving the temporalis didn't have any adverse effects. I also had my eyebrow lifted and a gold weight implanted in my eyelid to help it close.

Although the treatment is available on the NHS, I had it done privately because it would be quicker – and I noticed an improvement immediately. Gradually, as I exercised the new muscle, my face lost its droop and I was thrilled.

Having the operation has made an enormous difference to my confidence – I don't feel like I have to cover up any more. I used to hate having my photo taken, but now I quite enjoy it and have even put some up around the house. Best of all was being able to smile as I watched Toby and Anna walk down the aisle together. For the first time in years I was smiling inside and out!

Vivvy's life has been completely transformed by pioneering surgery



## Facial paralysis fact file

// Facial paralysis is a loss of voluntary muscle movement on one side of the face.

// There are a number of causes, which can include Bell's palsy, a stroke or brain tumour.

// Treatment depends on the cause,

so follow the advice of your health professional.

// Vivvy was treated at The McIndoe Surgical Centre in East Grinstead, West Sussex. For more details about the treatment, call 0800 917 4922 or visit [www.mcindoe-surgical.co.uk](http://www.mcindoe-surgical.co.uk)

PH: CHRISTIAN HUGH

MORE HEALTH, DIET AND WELL-BEING NEWS

YOURS // EVERY FORTNIGHT

41