Pioneering Surgeon Found
A Way to Rebuild Faces
By STEPHEN MILLER and DAVID GAUTHIER-VILLARS
June 28, 2008; Page A7

Operating where few surgeons dared, Paul Tessier forged a medical specialty dedicated to giving his severely deformed and injured patients new faces.

Using innovative procedures and teams of specialists, he pioneered such techniques as going through the brain cavity to work on the face from behind, sometimes repositioning eye sockets and grafting bones.

"He showed the world that you can go through the intracranial route to the face," says Kenneth Salyer, founder of the International Craniofacial Institute in Dallas.

"He was the first one who had the gumption to do it when we shied away from it," says Donald Wood-Smith, chairman of the plastic-surgery department at the New York Eye & Ear Infirmary. "Now, we do it with impunity and don't think twice about it."

Not content with mere improvement, Dr. Tessier told his patients and students, "If it is not normal, it is not enough." He introduced his techniques starting in the late 1960s. Today, there are more than 150 members of the International Society of Craniofacial Surgery, a group of doctors who address such problems as clefts that rend an entire face, gunshot wounds and conjoined twins connected at the head. Dr. Tessier's techniques allow all facial bones to be moved and modified at once. Sunken cheeks can be moved forward, chins reduced and the whole thing can be done without scarring by peeling the facial skin down from the hairline.

Typically, a craniofacial specialist is a qualified plastic surgeon who leads an operating team including brain surgeons, bone specialists and dentists. Most procedures -- perhaps 80% -- are performed on children with deformities. A half-million children world-wide are born each year with facial malformations but at least half receive no care, Dr. Salyer says.

"Craniofacial surgery is intensely collaborative," says S. Anthony Wolfe, a Miami craniofacial specialist who trained with Dr. Tessier in the mid-1970s.

Born in 1917 near Nantes, France, Dr. Tessier became a surgeon in 1943, after spending two years in a German prisoner-of-war camp. He joined the pediatric service at the Hôpital Foch in Paris in 1946, and received further training with British plastic-surgery pioneers Harold Gillies and Archibald McIndoe.

Frustrated at the limited treatment available to his most severely affected patients, he began experimenting on cadavers after work, investigating the complex bone structure of the face, which he learned to cut and reassemble like a jigsaw puzzle. Moving eye sockets meant he could fix congenital face asymmetry, a problem many victims say leaves them shunned by society.

"You see some of these patients," Dr. Wolfe says. "You can't believe what they've come through."

As word of his successes spread, young surgeons flocked to his operating theater and Dr. Tessier traveled abroad to lecture to doctors. Because sophisticated viewing systems such as magnetic resonance imaging weren't available, he turned to Michel Bourbon, a French sculptor, to prepare skulls showing malformations, interventions and results.
"Dr. Tessier traveled all over the world carrying my skulls in his suitcase," Mr. Bourbon says. "He loved holding a mold between his legs and cut into it to show the audience how he would do it on a real face."

A workaholic, Dr. Tessier was famed for his marathon operating sessions, and sometimes took on three patients at a time in parallel. He liked to take his recreation in big chunks, too. He trekked the Himalayas and went on African safaris, insisting on taking along a single gun-bearer instead of a whole retinue -- in fairness to the elephants. He scuba dived with Jacques Cousteau, and he drove race cars under the name "Harry Covert" -- French for green bean, perhaps a reference to his lanky frame.

After an operation, Dr. Wood-Smith says, he would head out to "one of the major Parisian restaurants and spend hours, eating, drinking and talking." He operated into his 80s and was still making contributions to the field up to his death June 6 in Paris at age 90.

His habitual answer to a challenge -- "Pourquoi pas?," French for "Why not?" -- became the International Society of Craniofacial Surgery's motto.

Dr. Tessier was awarded the Legion of Honor in 2005, and in 2000 was given the Jacobson Innovation Award by the American College of Surgeons.

* * *

--Rhonda L. Rundle contributed to this article.