FACE FACTS: THE SMILES WE TAKE FOR GRANTED UNTIL WE LOSE THEM

Thursday 3 March, 2016

What is a smile? What does it mean to you? A way of communicating, being able to express yourself? What if your face was emotionless? A recent survey by charity Facial Palsy UK suggests a loss of a smile is grossly underrated by the general public yet the impact is immense for people with facial paralysis.

The study, conducted in collaboration with Research Now, marks this year's Facial Palsy Awareness Week, and surprisingly, the results suggest that the general public underestimate the considerable impact of the loss of the smile in comparison to the views of those affected by facial palsy. Facial palsy, which affects over 100,000 people in the UK, occurs when the facial nerve is absent or damaged and can affect the ability to close the eye, smile, speak, eat and drink.

When asked to rank in order of importance how upsetting they would find various aspects of facial paralysis should it happen to them, 41% ranked difficulty smiling as the least upsetting symptom compared to issues with speech (2%), eating (13%), eye pain (15%) and the effect on self-confidence (29%). 35% considered speech difficulties to be the most upsetting symptom. This is in sharp contrast to people with facial palsy who in a recent separate survey ranked difficulty smiling as the overall most upsetting aspect of the condition.

Professor Nichola Rumsey of the Centre for Appearance Research says: “Many people are unaware of how much non-verbal communication we use (estimates are that around 70% of communication happens through non-verbal channels compared to 30% from actual words). The general public may expect that a person can compensate with words or in other ways (e.g. hand gestures) if the smile doesn't work completely. We know that when people communicate face to face (especially in first meetings), the focus is very much on the triangle between the outer corners of the eyes and the edges of the mouth – as the bulk of non-verbal communication happens here, so disruption to the smile can be particularly difficult.”

When shown a picture of someone with an obvious facial weakness, 68% of the general public said it was possibly caused by a Stroke. 13% identified a possible Bell's palsy which is the most common cause of facial paralysis, affecting between 12,400 and 24,800 people per year in the UK, a third of which are left with permanent disability. There are actually more than 30 different causes of facial nerve palsy; you can be born with the condition or acquire it as a result of trauma, surgery, neurological conditions and more.

Freya Beaumont, 17, who has a congenital form of facial palsy, says: “I would go home crying from school because people said things like 'your face was messed up by a car running over you', or 'you look like you've had a stroke'. The world is full of messages to girls about what beauty is and people have been taught that it's okay to point out your flaws.”

Craig Thorpe, 33, from Rotherham who has never recovered from Bell's palsy said: “I've always described 2nd December 2014 as the day I died. I am no longer the same person I once was. The day my niece was born I would have loved to hold her in my arms and smile at her. I'd like to be able to say thank you to a girl at a checkout and be able to smile.”

Karen Johnson, Deputy CEO of Facial Palsy UK says: “During Facial Palsy Awareness Week, the charity is asking people to consider what their everyday life would be like if they were reluctant or unable to smile due to a health condition. We want people to be more aware of the difficulties for those affected by facial palsy.”

Facial Palsy Awareness Week takes place from 1-7 March 2016. For more information visit www.facialpalsy.org.uk/awareness

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About Facial Palsy UK (www.facialpalsy.org.uk), charity established 2012.

Facial Palsy Awareness Week - http://www.facialpalsy.org.uk/awareness

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Charity Aims

- To increase awareness of facial palsy and its social, physical and psychological consequences.
- To provide information and support for people living with facial palsy, their relatives, carers and medical professionals.
- To promote diagnosis, acute and long-term management and rehabilitation of people living with facial palsy.
- To establish support groups throughout the UK.
- To raise funds to support research and training for professionals involved in the diagnosis, management and treatment of facial palsy. This should allow for better treatments, which should be made accessible to all.

For a range of case studies, photos and more information contact:

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