

# 'Being stared at was all I ever knew'

Christian Constantine was born with the severest facial deformities his doctors had ever seen. Since a baby, he has been through more than 35 agonising operations to rebuild his features. **Caroline Phillips** hears how the tireless devotion of his family has kept him going

**W**hen Christian Constantine was born, the doctors at London's Portland hospital had never seen such severe cranio-facial deformities. They didn't, and still don't, have a name for his condition, but he is believed to be one of four people in the world with a combination of so many rare and serious defects. At 23, he has endured more than 35 operations, including highly risky major reconstructive ones. He has also faced the possibility of blindness, had his kidneys operated on, gone deaf in one ear and suffered life-threatening illnesses such as meningitis and hydrocephalus (fluid on the brain that causes compression).

Yet Christian's is a story of hope, determination and extreme bravery, which he has chronicled in a memoir for which literary agents Curtis Brown are seeking a publisher. We meet in the central London apartment belonging to Christian's mother, Mina, and father, Adam, a company director; who are both Greek but were raised in London. With his scarred forehead, slightly drooping right eyelid and somewhat distended cheek, Christian is now taken by most people for an accident victim rather than someone born with a rare combination of disabilities. He talks from the back of his throat, with a nasal tone: speech that, owing to therapy, is vastly improved since he was at nursery, when only his family understood him. ("At the time, I thought that was normal," he says later.)

Mina, 52, offers me biscuits, chocolate, fruit and tea. "I didn't know anything was wrong until Christian was born and I saw my doctor's eyes," she says. "Then they put me to sleep again immediately. I didn't see him for three days. Not until the nurses said, 'First we're going to

show a Polaroid picture of baby to mummy.' That's when I insisted on actually seeing him. He was very wrong-looking indeed. But I felt love at first sight."

The doctors were mystified. The bones of Christian's face had stopped forming prematurely, he had hypertelorism, which meant that his eyes were too far apart and his eyebrows abnormally high, and a severe cleft lip and palate, leaving the roof of his mouth open and the top gum exposed. ("That thing protruding from my lips is the roof of my mouth, I think," says Christian later, showing me photographs, including one of his mother holding him adoringly, and another of him aged three and wearing a bow tie with his father.) "They didn't even know whether he was going to live," says Mina, who had him baptised in intensive care when he was three days old.

At the time, the doctors were particularly concerned that the frontal lobe of his brain had been damaged by the cleft, which went up to his forehead. "They mentioned putting him in a home and also said, 'If he gets ill, we won't try hard to save him, all right?'" says Mina. "I said, 'I

**Christian with his mother Mina in 1985 (below) and today (right)**



agree.' That's the only time I ever felt that, when I thought he might be brain-damaged and not have a quality of life. Happily, he was fine. He had his first operation at six weeks, to repair his cleft lip. But nobody had any idea that we'd still be operating nearly 24 years later."

In the intervening years – from Chicago to Houston, London, Paris and Los Angeles – Christian has undergone a series of radical procedures (including moving his eyes and building a nose) as well as operations to create eyelids, to put bone grafts in his mouth to support teeth implants and to prevent urinary reflux (when urine flows back to the kidneys). In 1985, he had surgery at Great Ormond Street to correct his compressed head bones – his brain was growing faster than his skull would allow. Surgeons opened his head from ear-to-ear to release the bones. Shortly afterwards Christian got meningitis and hydrocephalus.

In 1993, Paul Tessier, the "grandfather" of cranio-facial surgery, performed a massive procedure on him in Paris to bring his eyes closer together and lower his eyebrows. Before the operation, Adam overheard Tessier saying to his anaesthetist in French, "We're entering a patch of fog without a compass."

"They had to remove the entire bone from my face and reshape it and my brain was 'shrunk' to allow more room for the surgeons to work," says Christian, straightforwardly. "Blindness was a risk, as was exposing my brain after meningitis." Afterwards, he threw up a lot of blood. "Obviously, I couldn't see anything because my eyes were stitched together."

Was this his lowest point? "I've often woken up and thought, 'This is physically unbearable,'" he says. "When I was 19, they had to correct a forehead defect by applying pressure to it. The only way to do this was to staple a bandage onto my head. To remove it, they had to yank it out. Excruciating." Once he had tissue expanders (which are similar to balloons) placed

