

Like many things in life, individual muscles aren't appreciated until we see what happens when they do not work. For children with Moebius syndrome, absence of the sixth and seventh cranial nerves, which carry impulses from the brain to the muscles of the face, leads to an odd collection of symptoms.

The first signs of Moebius syndrome are typically difficulty sucking, excessive drooling, and sometimes crossed eyes. The child has difficulty swallowing and chokes easily, cannot move the tongue well, and is very sensitive to bright light because he or she cannot squint or blink or even avert the eyes. Special bottles and feeding tubes can help the child eat, and surgery can correct eye defects.

Children with Moebius syndrome are slow to reach developmental milestones but do finally walk. As they get older, if they are lucky, they are left with only one symptom, but it is a rather obvious one—inability to form facial expressions.

A young lady named Chelsey Thomas called attention to this very rare condition when she underwent two surgeries that would

Chelsey Thomas was born with Moebius syndrome. Among other signs and symptoms associated with absence of the sixth and seventh cranial nerves, she could not smile.



enable her to smile. When she was seven years old, Chelsey had two transplants of nerve and muscle tissue from her legs to either side of her mouth, supplying the missing “smile apparatus.” Gradually, she acquired the subtle, and not-so-subtle, muscular movements of the mouth that make the human face so expressive. Chelsey inspired several other youngsters to undergo “smile surgery.” Publicity about her surgery informed many health care professionals about this extremely rare condition. ■