



## Katie Piper: After my horrific acid attack, I'm giving other burns victims a chance to face the world again

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Last updated at 12:24 PM on 28th July 2010

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Strolling into a glittering party at Sony's offices in London accompanied by music mogul Simon Cowell, former model Katie Piper looked happy and confident rubbing shoulders with the celebrity guests.

In her designer dress, 5in heels and perfect make-up, Katie drew gasps of admiration as she stepped on to the podium to launch her charity to improve rehabilitation facilities for burns survivors in the UK through the Katie Piper Foundation.

Moments later the shocked silence of everyone in the room was palpable as a video revealed the horrific injuries Katie suffered on March 31, 2008, after her face was destroyed following an acid attack instigated by her former boyfriend, Daniel Lynch, now 33.



**Brave:** Katie Piper is setting herself the task of helping others who have been victims of severe burns

He had already raped Katie two days before and held her captive in a London hotel for eight hours, but his revenge for being rejected seemingly knew no bounds and under his direction, accomplice Stefan Sylvestre, now 22, threw a cup of industrial-strength sulphuric acid in her face.

In May 2009, Lynch and Sylvestre were told by the judge that they were 'the face of pure evil'. Both were jailed for life and Lynch will serve a minimum of 16 years.

Katie's surgeon, Mr Mohammad Ali Jawad, now candidly admits: 'I took one look at Katie's face and said to myself, "How do I deal with this?" I was a respected plastic surgeon with 16 years' experience but I knew that I was in trouble. I'd never dealt with anything like this.'

Rushed to the burns unit of Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, Katie was showered with tap water for ten hours as medics fought to neutralise the effect of the acid on her skin and prevent further damage. Eye drops were also administered every few minutes to try to wash the acid away.

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But her injuries were unimaginable. The left side of Katie's face was burned away to the fat layer - the only thing beyond it was muscle and bone.

She lost the sight in her left eye and acid also dripped down her neck, ears and hands as well as slipping into her nose and throat, with further terrible consequences.

For more than a year she had to be fed through a tube in her stomach and now, every few weeks, has surgery to dilate her oesophagus - which narrows to just one centimetre - as scar tissue at three separate sites reforms, restricting her ability to eat or drink.

Largely because of the oesophagus problems, Katie, now 27, has had more than 40 operations since the attack. General anaesthetics are now very safe, but Mr Jawad admits that the long-term effects on her liver are unknown.

While the first days remain hazy in Katie's memory, not least because she was given strong painkillers, for her mother Diane, 51, they will be forever etched in her brain.

When she saw her daughter, Diane secretly believed Katie would be better off dead. 'I couldn't see a way back for her, or imagine what sort of future she'd have,' says Diane. 'Everything she'd hoped for and dreamed of, being a model and TV presenter, depended on her face and it was gone.'

Mr Jawad began the first of Katie's facial surgeries the day after she was admitted, in a process called debridement - removing the damaged or dead tissue and preserving what was healthy.

Further debridement followed two days later and, a week after she was admitted, the process of rebuilding Katie's face began.

'Because the burn was so deep, we had to rebuild layer by layer. Initially we used cadaver skin which was stapled to her face.

To preserve the healthy tissue, cadaver skin is removed from donors after their deaths and preserved in deep freeze at -70C and is stored at the Liverpool Skin Bank. The skin can then be used on any patient without being matched to suitable recipients.

'We used it to preserve what we could of Katie's face until we were able to use grafts of her own skin. But the damage was so great that to replace all the layers of facial skin from her own donor site, her lower back, would have meant severe further scarring,' says Mr Jawad.

After discussions with colleagues here and in America and Germany, the surgeon embarked on the first operation of its kind using a synthetic skin substitute called Matriderm, made of collagen and elastin, and in one procedure layered it on to Katie's face to slowly rebuild its foundations and give it shape.

Mr Jawad admits: 'We pretty much took her face off and then recreated what was missing, layer by layer, in a single operation which had never been done before.'

It was crucial that the results of the six-hour surgery, once dressed, were allowed to settle, so Katie was put into an induced coma for 12 days. There were three further dressing changes while Katie was asleep to stop movement and infection and to ensure she did not suffer pain.

'By using the combination of Matriderm and Katie's own grafts, the quality of the skin was immediately obvious to me,' says Mr Jawad. 'It was more pliable and not irregular as many burn scars are.'

Katie was woken from her coma and began six weeks of intensive scar-management, which involved daily massage of the injured areas, use of silicon gel (Kelo-cote) on healed areas, along with constant applications of moisturising creams. Massage and physiotherapy helped strengthen her limbs, which had become weakened by more than a month and a half in a hospital bed.

Daily sessions with a psychologist helped Katie cope with her ordeal, but when she saw her face for the first time, seven weeks after being attacked, she was left reeling.

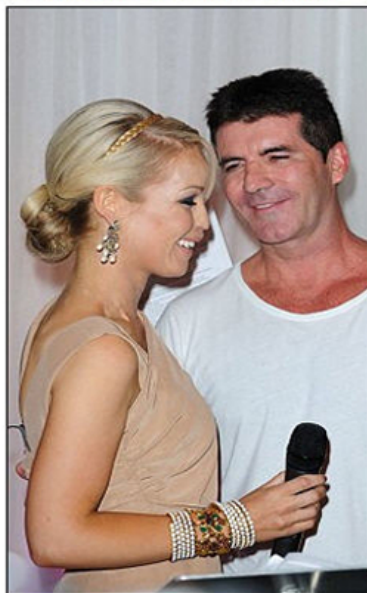
'When I held up the mirror I thought someone had given me a broken one or put a silly face on it as a joke,' she says. 'I knew that they'd taken my face away and that it was put somewhere in a bin, but in my head I assumed I'd look like the old Katie, just with a few red blotches.'

'I was so embarrassed that people had seen me like this. I wanted to tear the whole thing off and make it go away. There was nothing about me that I recognised. My identity as I knew it had gone.'

After being discharged from hospital in May 2008, Katie returned to her parents' home in Hampshire and relied on the support of mum Diane, dad David, 60, a businessman, and sister Suzy, 23, a student. To try to even out the scar tissue, Katie had to wear pressure garments 24 hours a day to cover her burns, including a balaclava-style mask.



Model ambition: Katie before the acid attack



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After a year she began wearing a clear plastic mask during the day.

'They were uncomfortable and I didn't want to wear them, but there is a two-year window of opportunity to work on scar-management after a burn and I knew that I had to do whatever I could to help myself.

'It was difficult, not just for me but for my family. They would take it in turns to moisturise my skin and massage me four times a day to try to flatten the skin. If a drop of cream fell on to my skin unexpectedly, I would scream as it reminded me of the acid dripping down me.

We'd all try to pretend that everything was OK when all the time we were treading on eggshells - them so that they didn't hurt or upset me, and me because it is all too easy to lash out at those you are closest to,' says Katie.

In August 2008, Mr Jawad told Katie about a special burns rehabilitation unit, Centre Ster in France. Because there is no facility like it in the UK and due to the extent of her injuries, she was given funding for five three-week therapy sessions.

Endermologie machines, usually used to get rid of cellulite, have rollers that provide deep-tissue massage. They were used around Katie's eyes and nose as well as on her neck and hands to help align scar formation and soften the scar.

She also had hydrotherapy, using a high-pressure jet of water on her scars to reduce the vivid red scarring that is common to all burns victims.

Gym sessions, stretches and facial exercises also helped bring back elasticity to her damaged skin. 'It was a nine-to-five regime and it not only gave me a new lease of life, I firmly believe that it, combined with Mr Jawad's pioneering surgery, gave me my smile back and facial expressions,' she says. 'The results were amazing. My skin looked paler and smoother and more like normal skin.

'Psychologically it gave me my confidence back, too. I never thought I'd wear a bikini again, but I was with other people like me who were disfigured and I didn't feel out of place. I felt normal. For the first time in months I didn't feel embarrassed.

'I was incredibly lucky to get the help and funding that I did but I know better than anyone that it isn't enough just to have brilliant surgeons for burns victims. Therapy is also vital and can change people's lives. They may never be as perfect as they once were but they can be the best they can possibly be.'



Katie Piper, with surgeon Mohammad Jawad who treated her following the acid attack

With the help of Simon Cowell, who has become patron, The Katie Piper Foundation aims to raise £1.5million to start a clinic, similar to Centre Ster, in Britain.

For Katie, the operations to her oesophagus continue but now every eight weeks instead of every two. 'I want to eat but it is like having reflux. The scar tissue won't allow even little bits of food to go down so I have to rely on protein shakes for nourishment when it's really bad.'

For her scars, she uses a shop bought massager and moisturises her skin with an aqueous cream twice daily to help keep it pliable.

In January last year, Mr Jawad and colleague Professor Erol injected microfat graft cells from Katie's inner thighs into her face around the cheeks, eyes and lips to make the face appear fuller and smoother. The effect is permanent.

She says: 'What happened to me made me a different but a better person and I have a role to play in helping others. If I can do that, the suffering my family and I have been through won't have been in vain.'

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