

## **UC San Diego**

### **Spring 2020 - UC San Diego Health Journal of Nursing: The Unique Power of Nursing**

#### **Title**

Introduction to Solid Organ Transplant

#### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6p18r7vp>

#### **Journal**

UC San Diego Health Journal of Nursing, 13(1)

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#### **Publication Date**

2020-04-01

Peer reviewed

# Solid Organ Transplant at UCSD

By: Tamra Magee, MSN, RN

## Organ Transplantation... a dream of the past, a reality of the present and a hope for the future.

Once a dream of science fiction, organ transplantation has become a modern mastery of medicine. Years of botched and failed attempts provided invaluable experience and knowledge, and finally gave way to tremendous successes. Today, more than 90% of patients who receive an organ transplant survive beyond 1 year; many going on to lead “normal” lives and outliving their original prognosis by several years.

As the only academic health center in San Diego, UC has long been a leader in the transplant community. As the region’s first (and only academic) transplant center, UCSD has a 50 year history of providing comprehensive care for those in need of transplant as a treatment for end-stage organ failure as well as for those who are willing and able to become living kidney and liver donors. From performing San Diego’s first kidney transplant in 1968, to implanting the first electronically-driven ventricular assist device (VAD) in 1998, to the first Hope Act (HIV+) transplant in 2019, we have proudly pioneered many advancements in the field.

Dr. Robert Steiner recalls the early days... “In the beginning many of the kidneys didn’t work and had to be taken out almost immediately. Now it is rare if a kidney doesn’t work. It really is incredible, the progress we’ve made.” He has been

with the kidney program since 1978, a time when transplantation was still relatively novel and when, despite early successes, UC San Diego had fewer than 100 patients registered on the national waiting list.

Today, there are nearly 1,000 patients waitlisted among all the organ programs at UC San Diego Health. Although the waiting time is often longer in Southern California than it is in less populated areas of the country, patients come from both near and far because they know they will receive high quality, lifelong care at UCSD.

Joanie Salotti, a transplant nurse practitioner, can recount the names and transplant dates of some of the liver program’s first patients. Joanie started as an ICU RN in November of 1993, just five months after the first liver transplant was performed. She cared for newly transplanted patients in the ICU for 8 years before joining the team as an NP in

2001. She has collected many special memories, but the one that stands out the most for her is caring for an infant who received a piece of her mother’s liver through living donation. Joanie continues to care for that baby – now 18 years old – post-transplant. Watching her continue to grow and thrive has been one of the great joys of Joanie’s career.

Of course, not every transplant story has a happy ending. Patients often end up critically ill, with multiple comorbidities; and the demand for deceased donor organs far surpasses the available supply. Across San Diego county, 20 people a day die while waiting for transplants. With the increasing need for alternative options, our team has worked to develop and improve surgical techniques in order to save more lives.

David Garcia, NP can recollect many innovative ideas that he has played a part in implementing since joining the heart and lung program in 1997. Although the program performed its first successful double lung transplant in 1991, the 64th in the world, the concept of a double lung transplant from a living donor, at the time, had crossed few minds. Using portions of lung from each of his parents, a 16-year-old boy suffering from cystic fibrosis became the first person at UC San Diego, and the fourth person in the entire world, to undergo the procedure.



**Tamra Magee, MSN, RN** has been with UC San Diego Health for a year and a half as the Director for the Center of Transplantation. She spent the first ten years of her career in northern California as a registered respiratory therapist and then decided to attend nursing school to continue to expand in the field of healthcare. She has worked as a registered nurse for the past eighteen years in cardiac intervention, ICU and transplant. She entered the specialty of transplant after a personal experience with transplantation. Her father, who suffered from Primary Sclerosing Cholangitis (PSC) received a successful liver transplant sixteen years ago and she joined the Organ procurement organization (OPO) as a transplant coordinator one year later. For the past twelve years, Tamra has been in a transplant leadership position and in 2016 earned her MSN with a concentration in leadership from Chamberlain College of Nursing. She feels fortunate to have had opportunities to serve on national committees and present on transplant topics over the years. She was appointed as one of the first regional collaborative leaders to transition the HRSA donation and transplantation community of practice from a national level to the local region level. Most recently, she serves on a national leadership committee with The Alliance, an organization that provides engaged learning and collaborative leadership for the transplant professional community. In her free time, she enjoys traveling with her family.

Unfortunately, the boy did not survive for long, but David is proud to have been a part of a team that pushed the envelope – doing everything in their power to give their patient a second chance at life.

For the most part, the benefits of organ transplantation have been worth the risks. Take, for example, the time that Dr. Victor Pretorius was able to re-transplant a heart into a new recipient after the first had died from unrelated health complications. This procedure had only been done 10 times worldwide as of 2016. It is this kind of thinking, this leadership, that's landed the heart transplant program among the best in the nation.

To date, the UC San Diego Health Center for Transplantation has performed more than 5,000 heart, lung, kidney, liver and multi-organ transplants. We continue to push the envelope, not only because we have some of the brightest minds and most technically skilled surgeons in the country, but because it's the right thing to do for our patients. Here's to another 50 years and 5,000 transplants!

*"I want to thank my colleagues in transplant for sharing their valuable insights & memories with me for the purpose of this article."*