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The Changing Face of Kidney Donation

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UC San Diego Medical Center recently celebrated the 40th anniversary of the opening of its kidney transplant program. We are proud to have been instrumental in providing transplants to needy kidney recipients since 1968. Ours was the first transplant program in San Diego and still remains the largest in the city. To this date, over 2,500 kidney transplants have been performed at UC San Diego, making us one of the largest and oldest kidney transplant programs in the country. I started with UCSD in 1981 and have been a part of a transplant team that I am very proud of. I have witnessed significant changes in the field of transplantation and UCSD has always been at the forefront of this innovation. Unfortunately, the dire shortage of donor organs for transplant still prevents us from helping an even greater number of kidney recipients.

According to the United Network for Organ Sharing, there are over 80,000 patients in the United States currently waiting for a kidney transplant. In 2008, there were only 16,518 kidney

transplants performed in the entire country. This number included both deceased and living donor transplants. Sadly, this has led to long waiting times for patients on the UNOS waiting list. Some patients are unable to survive long enough to wait for a cadaver donor. Even though dialysis can temporize the disease and prolong the patient's life, it is not without hazards and difficulties. Knowing that the donor shortage is what limits us, the UCSD kidney transplant team has put greater effort into increasing the number of living donor transplants in order to increase the number of patients being transplanted and decrease the size of the waiting list. I have witnessed first hand the efforts put forth by this institution to successfully promote living donation.

When I started with this program in 1981, the criteria for accepting individuals for kidney donation was very different. Donors at this time were always under the age of 50. Only blood relatives were accepted for donation and were limited to the immediate family. They were aggressively screened for any



Tina Kress RN, BSN, CCTC has been a nurse since 1975. She has over 25 years of experience in organ donation and transplantation working as a procurement and clinical coordinator and as the Manager of Recovery Systems. She currently holds the position of Living Donor Transplant Coordinator and is responsible for coordinating all of the living donor transplants performed at UCSD Medical Center.

medical history or current condition that might have even remotely affected their kidney function in the future. The surgery for a living donor was much more invasive. The kidney was removed using an open flank procedure, requiring a long hospitalization and a long and painful recovery time. Many things have changed over the years to increase the number of living donors.

As time went on, a biological relationship with the transplant recipient was no longer required in order to be considered as a candidate for donation.





On August 19, 2009 Patti Ford of San Carlos, who had been on the national kidney waiting list and on dialysis for four years, received a kidney from Robyn Bryan of Escondido. Ford's husband, Patrick, gave one of his kidneys to Bryan's husband, Paul, who had been waiting for six months and was weeks away from needing to start dialysis. Both Patti and Paul wanted to donate to their sick spouses, but unfortunately their blood types were not compatible. Living donor coordinator Tina Kress realized that although the Bryants were not compatible with each other, they matched perfectly with the Fords. The UC San Diego transplant team facilitated the paired exchange to ensure that the transplanted organs were likely to be accepted by the recipients. Such donor and recipient couple transplants are becoming more common as regional kidney networks look for creative ways to match donor and recipient pairs and to decrease the long waiting period for kidney transplant recipients.

Initially we determined that donors with an emotional bond with the recipient could also be considered. Over time we learned that the success rates for these types of non-related living donor transplants are equal to those of living related donors. Today, many of our transplants are from spouses, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances. But we did not stop there. In February 2003, UCSD Medical Center performed the first two "Good Samaritan" donor transplants in San Diego history. These individuals graciously donated one of their kidneys to recipients they had never met and who were waiting on the UNOS waiting list. We continue to get offers from kind individuals willing to give of themselves so another person's quality of life will be enriched.

To further promote living donation and make it more appealing to potential candidates, our center continues to re-evaluate our procedures and make appropriate changes. Starting in 1999 the laparoscopic procedure

was introduced at UCSD. While some transplant programs still use the open flank procedure on some or all of their donors, our program begins all donor surgeries with the laparoscope and converts to the open flank only if problems occur during the surgery. This has only been necessary one time in the past 4 years. This new procedure allows our donors a faster recovery time, results in less discomfort and makes potential donors more likely to go forward. Over the years our acceptance criteria has also changed, allowing the older person and the potential donor with mild hypertension to go forward if their kidney function is good. These individuals are counseled regarding any additional risk to themselves and are given ample opportunity to reconsider their decision to donate.

Development of the technology era brought computer sites dedicated to linking individuals needing transplants with those willing to donate. A careful and diligent screening is done on

all potential internet donors at our institution. Potential donors are required to come to San Diego for a full workup prior to the transplant to insure that they are an appropriate candidate. Careful effort is made to ensure that they are not pressured into donating or motivated by financial considerations.

There are also internet sites devoted to 'Paired Kidney Donation'. 'Paired Kidney Donation' is an option for patients awaiting kidney transplantation who have friends or family who are willing to donate a kidney, but who are unsuitable because their blood or genetic markers are not compatible with those of the patient. With a paired kidney transplant, two incompatible donor recipient pairs exchange kidneys, making two living donor transplants possible. In August of this year the first paired donation transplant in San Diego took place at UCSD Medical Center. Two recipients received living donor transplants as a result of this exchange.

At UCSD Medical Center we recognize the importance of the living donor. We have a dedicated living donor team who insures that donor needs are met and that they are treated with 'TLC'. All donors are given a 'hero' medal, letting them know how special they are to us. Hopefully, by aggressively pursuing all living and deceased donors we can eliminate the waiting list for transplants and offer all potential recipients 'The Gift of Life'.

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