

Three-Way Kidney Swaps Shorten Waits For Transplants

BY JONEL ALECCIA

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SEATTLE — When Leo Cruz needed a kidney last year, his daughter, Maria Smythe, immediately agreed to help.

The 76-year-old retired mechanic from Yakima had already had one transplant, from a brother 19 years ago, but that organ was wearing out.

"I said, 'I'm here,'" recalled Smythe, 50.

But when the father-daughter pair went for testing to get the surgery started, they learned it wouldn't work. Cruz has O positive blood, while Smythe's type is A positive, a mismatch that made a transplant impossible.

"I had six kidneys, from all my kids and grandkids, and not one was a match," Cruz said.

Instead, doctors at Swedish Medical Center in Seattle offered a different idea: What if Smythe donated her kidney to someone else, in exchange for an organ for her dad?

"I asked him, 'Are you willing?' And he said, 'Just do it,'" Smythe said.

That decision helped kick off a kidney swap involving six people in two states in what experts say is the first Pacific Northwest three-way paired exchange that links willing but mismatched donors with recipients in need.

The operations — three kidneys removed, three transplanted — took place on the same day, Dec. 8, in Seattle and Portland. So far, all six people are doing well in the complicated trade that included not only the father and daughter, but also two brothers in Seattle and two longtime friends in Sherwood, Ore.

"It was a really great thing," said Dr. Lisa Florence, director of the kidney transplant program at Swedish Medical Center. "It's a testament to all of the surgeons in the transplant centers that they worked really well together."

The multiple exchange is the first regional example of what transplant experts say could be a growing solution for the more than 101,000 people in the U.S. waiting for kidneys, including 2,380 in Oregon and Washington, federal figures show.

Kidney chains — including a link that featured 60 people and 30 organs — are becoming more common across the U.S. They typically begin with an altruistic donor, someone who doesn't have a specific recipient in mind.

Paired kidney exchanges are



ELLEN M. BANNER/SEATTLE TIMES/TNS

Maria Smythe gives her father, Leo Cruz, a kiss in his Yakima, Washington, home on April. Smythe is a kidney donor who wanted to donate to her father, but the pair were not a match. Instead, they became part of a three-way paired kidney exchange, the first in the Northwest.

different. They typically involve a donor who wants to offer an organ to a specific recipient, usually a friend or loved one, but is incompatible because of a mismatch in age, size, blood type or antigen sensitivity. Instead of giving to the original patient, the person donates to another patient who also has a mismatched donor.

"It's where you have a recipient who has an incompatible but willing donor, but then they just kind of swap donors," Florence explained.

There are national paired kidney-exchange programs, including one operated through the United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS), the National Kidney Registry and the Alliance for Paired Donation. Patients can be enrolled simultaneously in all exchange programs in which their transplant centers participate.

But the logistics involved in transporting a kidney from Florida to Washington, for instance, mean that such national arrangements may often break down.

Of the approximately 6,000 live-donor kidney transplants that occur in the U.S. each year, fewer than 600 are unrelated paired donations, UNOS figures show.

Paired exchanges aren't completely new in Washington state, where 36 such swaps have been performed since 2006, according to

UNOS. Both Swedish and Virginia Mason medical centers have conducted two-way paired exchanges; Virginia Mason officials say they've completed five paired exchanges in the past two years.

But organizers say a three-way trade involving transplant centers in two states is novel, and that the practice is gaining new momentum because of a clinical trial sponsored by BiologicTx, a Totowa, N.J., biotechnology company that uses proprietary software to match donors and recipients based on medical criteria.

Previously, doctors would sketch out potential paired matches on paper, Florence said. Now, so-called computer "match runs" are conducted weekly, offering quicker and more accurate assessments of potential organ trades.

The firm's MatchGrid software — which works something like an online-dating site for kidneys — has been used in transplant swaps across the country, including a six-way paired kidney donation conducted over two days in March at California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco.

Larger swaps are possible when more paired donors are enrolled, noted Darrin Carrico, president and co-founder of BiologicTx.

"If you have 50 to 70 pairs, you can put the six-ways and 12-ways together," he said.

Four Northwest transplant centers — Swedish and Virginia Mason medical centers in Seattle, Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) in Portland and Sacred Heart Medical Center in Spokane — are participating in the trial, which aims to find donors for the hardest-to-match patients. So far, there are between 10 and 12 pairs enrolled at the sites combined, Carrico said.

That includes so-called sensitized patients who have antibodies that react unfavorably to foreign tissue. The antibodies are usually acquired through blood transplants, organ transplants or, in women, pregnancies.

"If we try to give a kidney with those antibodies, it would be attacked by the person's system," Florence explained.

About 30 percent of people on the kidney transplant waiting list are sensitized, and some are highly sensitized, which can triple or quadruple the wait for organs from deceased donors.

That was the case for Trish Tulley, 46, a Portland realtor who was diagnosed with kidney disease at 18 and has had two previous kidney transplants. Tulley's friend since high school, Kristi Pfarr, 47, a medical receptionist, was eager to help, but she was not a good match because Tulley is so highly sensitized.

Doctors at OHSU suggested

paired donation. Pfarr said it took her a moment to adjust to the notion of giving her kidney to a stranger.

"My kidney was going into Trish, and that was going to be Trish's kidney," she said. "But then everyone said, 'Isn't that the same thing? She's still getting a kidney.'"

The situation was similar for two Seattle brothers who declined to discuss their experience. John Michael Yasutake, 45, wanted to donate to his brother, who asked to remain anonymous.

And then there was Cruz and Smythe, who were mismatched because of conflicting blood types.

All three pairs agreed to participate in the BiologicTx trial that started last year. By fall, the MatchGrid software had matched them up.

"It was shocking," recalled Tulley. "It literally could have been years and years."

In the end, Smythe donated her kidney to Yasutake's brother in Seattle, Yasutake's kidney went to Tulley and Pfarr's kidney was transplanted in Cruz.

The operations took place hours apart, with one kidney heading south in an organ-courier van to Portland and the other motoring north from Portland to Seattle. In the case of Cruz's operation, his transplant was delayed because the kidney courier got stuck in Seattle traffic.

All of the donors and recipients recovered quickly and without problems, doctors said.

The chief obstacle to conducting more paired donation exchanges is enrolling more people in the program, said Dr. David Scott, surgical director of the kidney transplant program at OHSU.

"From the donor's perspective, they can get their loved one transplanted and they also help somebody else get transplanted," he said. "The downside is that you lose a little flexibility. You don't know when the computer is going to generate that match that you're going to be part of. You could wait three or four months. With highly sensitized people, it could be years."

Tulley, Pfarr and other participants said they hoped that sharing their stories would inspire others to consider paired donation.

"It was my kidney. It's not mine anymore," said Pfarr, who plans to meet Cruz in person soon. "It's in his body. I would want someone to do that for my dad if my dad was in that situation."

Cuba's Removal From Terrorism List May Prove Symbolic

BY MIMI WHITEFIELD

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MIAMI — Regulations governing the United States' new commercial opening toward Cuba were announced in January, but so far there have been few takers.

Most businesses are still kicking the tires when it comes to Cuba and trekking to the island, often with lawyers in tow, to assess the opportunities and risks. A trade delegation led by New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo last week, however, reported progress had been made on deals in the telecom and health care fields — two areas where U.S. businesses are allowed to engage with the Cuban government under the new U.S. Cuba policy.

But even when Cuba is removed from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, a designation that carries some financial sanctions, analysts say they don't expect it will set off a business stampede, either.

"I think people are re-evaluating, but they are waiting until the 45-day waiting period is up before taking the next step," said Fernando Capablanca, managing director of White Cap Consulting Group and president of the Cuban Banking Study Group. "I think everyone wants to play it very safe — what's 45 days after 55 years?"

In December, President Barack Obama announced a new policy of engaging Cuba after more than half a century of trying to bring about change through isolating the island, and on April 14, he informed Congress that he intended to remove Cuba from the terrorism list, starting the clock ticking on the waiting period.

With the Cuban-American delegation saying last week that it wouldn't be mounting a challenge to the de-listing, Cuba is set to come off the list in late May. The United States put Cuba on the list in 1982 at a time when Havana was promoting armed revolution in Latin America and Africa.

Stephen F. Propst, a Washington attorney, said the de-listing will be an important step in the U.S.-Cuba normalization process, but he expects

it will have limited immediate impact on economic activity between the United States and the island.

However, he said, "It's a very important step to move forward on diplomatic relations between the two countries." Keeping Cuba on the list, Propst said, is a "label, largely a version of diplomatic name-calling."

Andy Fernandez, leader of Holland & Knight's Cuba Action Team, said removing Cuba from the terrorism list removes a "barricade, a roadblock" that has made U.S. companies hesitant to even engage in legal business dealings with Cuba.

Under Obama's new Cuba policy, Americans can trade select goods with private Cuban entrepreneurs, supply private farmers in Cuba, sell building supplies to private individuals, and participate in Internet and telecom projects that will improve the connectivity of the Cuban people.

But the impact of the de-listing will be muted because there's still a thicket of sanctions imposed under the embargo, the Helms-Burton Act and other U.S. laws that remain in effect, including provisions that require U.S. banks to block transactions with Cuba or Cuban nationals who aren't in the permitted category.

New regulations allow a bank to reject such transactions. "That makes a lot of difference if you're the person whose money is blocked and you can't get it back," said lawyer Patricia Hernandez during a Cuba seminar organized by the Florida International Bankers Association and the Cuban Banking Study Group last week.

"The overall risk with Cuba will remain as long as the embargo is in place," Andy Fernandez said.

Lifting the embargo "will be the new elephant in the room in future talks," said Peter Schechter, director of the Adrienne Arsht Latin American Center at the Atlantic Council.

The United States and Cuba are currently negotiating to renew diplomatic ties and open embassies. So far, there have been three rounds of talks.

"Cuomo's trip illustrates

not only the eagerness but also the frustration that U.S. governors feel — the 1996 Helms-Burton Act handicaps their states' trade opportunities," he said.

The embargo, which was

phased in gradually starting in 1960, was codified through Helms-Burton and cannot be totally lifted without an act of Congress.

Companies such as Netflix, IDT, which has begun offering

direct telephone service to Cuba rather than making the final connection through a third party, and lodging company Airbnb, which is working with private Cuban casas particulares or bed and breakfasts,

have staked out territory in Cuba. MasterCard and American Express also say they want to allow U.S. customers to use their cards in Cuba.



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