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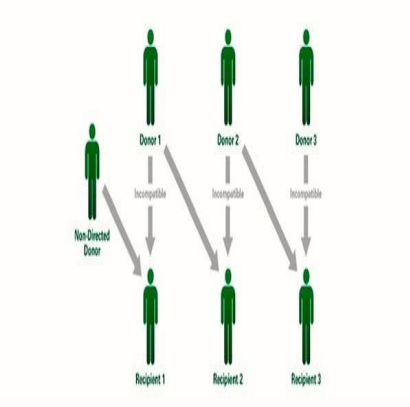
Kidney Transplant Chain Saves Six Lives In Australia



Australia's largest paired kidney exchange saved the lives of six people in recent weeks, but the number of lives affected by the operation reaches into the hundreds. In addition to the families of the recipients who will enjoy the extended lives of their loved ones, more than 200 medical staff contributed to the successful simultaneous surgeries.

Kidney Transplant Chains

In a kidney transplant chain like the one recently performed in Australia, a donor who wishes to give a kidney to a specific patient, but who is not a compatible match for that patient, gives his or her kidney to another person on the transplant list with whom the donor is compatible -- despite not knowing the recipient. That recipient also has a willing but incompatible donor, who donates a kidney to a compatible stranger since his or her intended recipient will be receiving an organ from the first patient's originally intended donor. And so the chain continues, often removing several kidney failure patients from transplant wait lists in rapid succession.

If a single person in the chain had chosen not to participate or was unable to proceed with the operation, the entire process could have collapsed. One recipient had a mysterious mound on his leg, which was discovered just prior to the start of the surgeries. A biopsy was conducted in order to exclude a cancer diagnosis. Fortunately for everyone involved, it was simply a complication of the patient's kidney failure.

A Team Effort Worth Repeating

The Australian Paired Kidney Exchange Program is a triumph for the transplant surgeons, doctors, nurses and other members of the medical team involved in the coordinated effort. It also testifies to the generosity of the live kidney donors who were able to help their loved ones by giving their organs to unknown recipients in the chain.

Some of the success of the paired exchanges must be attributed to the scientists who make the matches from a computer database. Dr. Paolo Ferrari, the Australian program's director, likened it to using a dating agency to find a compatible match. Of course, preferences in this case would involve blood type instead of body type, and antibody levels instead of a fondness for long walks on the beach.

Altruistic kidney donors who initiate or participate in a transplant exchange program usually do not know who will receive their organs, but the life-changing effects reverberate. So far, the Organ and Tissue Authority program has made possible 92 transplants, a figure which could grow exponentially with a larger pool of potential matches.

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