

HEALTH BEAT: ORGAN TRANSPLANTS

Woman gets kidney from late fiance

Family agrees to operation after aneurysm kills man

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When Marilyn Faye Perry was holding a bedside vigil for her fiance, she had only one fervent wish: that he fully recover so they could grow old together.

It didn't occur to her that this man would be a candidate to replace her own failing kidneys.

"He couldn't do this for me while he was alive, so he had to wait until he was gone to show how much he loved me," said Perry, 37, choking back tears from her hospital bed at Rush University Medical Center.

Eugene Bush, 55, died July 14 of a brain aneurysm. He had no history of neurological problems -- not even headaches -- but he did have cardiac bypass surgery in 1999, long before the couple became engaged. Still, he appeared to be in robust health, never missing a shift as a security guard at Sears Tower, according to family members.

But on July 5, Bush felt sufficiently queasy that he got off the bus en route to work. The next day, Perry found him crumpled on the kitchen floor of their South Shore home. He ended up at the University of Chicago Hospital, never regaining consciousness.

After eight days in a coma, he was declared brain dead, and Bush's family wondered whether their father would be a suitable organ donor.

"He was an all-around great guy ... and we thought perhaps this it was a way for something good to come out of all this," said Eugene Bush III, the second eldest of his five children, who range from 22 to 32.

Children swing into action

The Bush children knew that Perry, a certified nursing assistant, suffered from kidney failure. But they had no idea that dialysis so consumed her life -- four hours a day, three

days a week -- that she had to quit her job. Or that she had been waiting for a new kidney for one year; a delay typically can stretch into four to six years, depending on blood type. Or that more than 300 people in Illinois die each year waiting for a donated organ that never becomes available. Currently, there are about 4,730 people in the Chicago area awaiting transplants, of which two-thirds are for kidneys, according to Gift of Hope, the organ-procurement organization that serves the state's nine transplant centers.

Perry doubted she would be a beneficiary. After all, the couple had different blood types, and because of her fiance's pre-existing heart condition, he was immediately ruled out as a living donor. But when the tests came back, Bush was a perfect match.

"I couldn't believe it," she said. "He loved me so much he had to give me a piece of himself."

So, on July 16, two procedures got under way, one at the University of Chicago Hospital to remove Bush's kidney; the other at Rush, where it was stitched into Perry. The kidney, pink and vital, started working immediately.

Such an arrangement is called a "direct donation," in which an organ donor or donor's family can specify who should receive the gift, said Dr. Stephen Jensik, the Rush surgeon who performed the transplant. The logistics can be tricky; the available organ from the deceased has to be the best match for the recipient, who also must be healthy enough to undergo surgery.

'Poignant'

Still, Jensik called such occurrences "infrequent but not rare." He recalled a 2002 case when a Chicago mother received her 3-year-old daughter's kidneys after the child was killed by a falling tree branch.

"Knowing where the kidney came from ... just makes the whole circumstance more poignant," said Jensik, a transplant surgeon for 25 years. "You need to be extra sensitive." (The Bush children also donated their father's other organs, which will go to anonymous recipients).

That juxtaposition of joy and sorrow certainly played out for Perry, who met her future mate in 1992. Over the years, their friendship blossomed into something more until they moved in together.

Now, she sat in her hospital bed, contemplating the emotional roller coaster of the last week. A mere three days after surgery, Perry was allowed to leave Rush for a few hours to attend Bush's funeral.

"It wasn't just me recovering, it was him," she said, clutching her lower abdomen. "He always said he wanted to give me the world. ... Instead, he gave me my life."

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By the numbers

*The number of organs and tissues donated in Illinois and northwest Indiana reached an all-time high in 2006, saving more than 900 lives.

*A statewide poll shows that nearly 90 percent of Illinois adults say registering to be an organ/tissue donor is the right thing to do. Yet, 40 percent say they have not registered.

*More people are waiting for kidneys and corneas than any other organs and tissues. Other major organs that can be donated are the heart, lung, liver, pancreas and small intestine.

*About 1 to 2 percent of donations are "directed," meaning the family of the deceased makes a gift to a specific individual.

*To register as an organ/tissue donor in Illinois, visit donatelifeillinois.org or contact the Illinois secretary of state's office. If you signed up before Jan. 1, 2006, you need to re-register. Signing your driver's license no longer is enough, according to Kim McCullough of Gift of Hope.

-- B.M.R.

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