

Give life by signing up for organ donation registry

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Steve Spitzer passes the time by reading a book about training his dog, a Rhodesian Ridgeback. The Westland resident has been on the transplant list 3 1/2 years due to polycystic kidney disease. For the last 18-months, he's spent four hours a day, twice a week sitting in a chair in the University of Michigan Dialysis Unit in Livonia.

"It's like a prison. It's terrible. I come in at 5:30 a.m.," said Spitzer. "I'd like to encourage people to sign up to be an organ donor. People can't use them any way when they're dead."

Mark Gravel quotes the staggering statistics from United Network for Organ Sharing. 5,949 people died last year waiting for a transplant. While that figure is 12 percent less than the year before because people are signing up to donate their organs after death, transplant listed patients are still dying and that doesn't include the 1,843 who became so ill they had to be removed from the transplant list.

In 2005, the University of Michigan Transplant Center worked with Gift of Life Organ, Tissue & Eye Donor Registry in Michigan and similar organizations across the country to transplant 225 kidneys, a procedure U-M physicians have done since the 1960s.

April is National Donate Life Month and the need is urgent for people to sign up on the Gift of Life Registry. For more information, call (800) 482-4881 or visit www.giftoflifemichigan.org.

Beginning Monday, April 10 and continuing through the week volunteers will be in more than 135 Secretary of State offices from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. to pass out organ donor information.

In 2005, Gift of Life Michigan reported 799 organs were retrieved from 269 donors, each of which was able to save or improve the lives of up to 50 people.

"72 percent of patients on the waiting list are for kidneys," said Gravel, director of organ donation initiatives for the U-M Transplant Center. "Kidney transplants are effective in giving patients a higher quality of life than dialysis and are more cost effective than dialysis. Nationally almost half of all donations are from living donors, the rest from people who have passed away. Living donations have a higher survival rate than from dead."

At the U-M Health System once a patient is evaluated to be a recipient, information is given to them on living and deceased options. Patients then talk with family. If they're not able to donate for medical reasons, friends are approached.

"People sometimes donate for altruistic needs because they want to help someone in need," said Gravel.

"Nationally over 91,000 people are waiting for a transplant and the number tends to go up. We have a population that's aging and as they age there's going to be a greater need.

"It really takes a hero to do this. It's very sad when we deal with families who have the opportunity and don't donate and their loved one goes to the grave with organs."

Warren Harris is usually tired on the days he comes for dialysis at the U-M Health Center in Livonia. The 41-year old Belleville man has been on the transplant list since 2001. His kidneys failed because of high blood pressure 10 years ago.

Harris is a tenor in Charity, a choir formed to create awareness for the National Kidney Foundation in Michigan, a nonprofit dedicated to preventing kidney disease and improving the quality of life for those living with it.

"We need more donors," said Harris, "and for people to get more information about what we're going through."

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