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Customer donating kidney to grocery store clerk

Transplant set for next month at Northwestern Memorial Hospital

By Julie Deardorff, Tribune reporter

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Dan Coyne had the surprise all planned out: Near the end of Myra dela Vega's Friday night shift as a cashier at Jewel-Osco in Evanston, his children would buy some groceries and hand her a card. Inside would be the unexpected news that Coyne could donate one of his kidneys to dela Vega, who is suffering from renal failure.

But dela Vega, 49, who looked puzzled by the card, didn't open it. Instead, Coyne emerged from hiding and blurted out the news himself.

"Oh! Oh!" dela Vega said, covering her mouth as her knees started to buckle. Her eyes filled with tears. Later, she explained: "It's just so overwhelming to think someone is giving you an organ."

Nearly half of all the transplants in the U.S. are from living donors. Some are related by blood; others donate to a general pool; some, like Coyne, simply have an emotional connection with the recipient.

Currently, more than 105,596 people are waiting for an organ, according to the United Network for Organ Sharing registry. In Illinois, more than 4,600 people need transplants. Living donors, who are increasing in number every year, can lessen the gap.

Kidneys are the organ most commonly involved in living-donor transplants, because the body can function normally with only one of the fist-size organs.

The average wait for a kidney from a deceased donor in the Chicago region is about five years, said Dr. John Friedewald, a transplant nephrologist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, where dela Vega will have her operation March 26. Dela Vega had been waiting more than a year.

Half of living-donor kidneys transplanted now will still function in 25 years, whereas half of kidneys from deceased donors fail in the first 10 years, Friedewald said. Patients also experience significantly less pain, a shorter hospital stay and can return to normal life much faster.

Coyne, an elementary school social worker, met dela Vega two years ago while grocery shopping. They struck up a friendship, and when he learned she was starting dialysis for kidney failure, he asked whether she

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would consider him as a donor.

Dela Vega, an Evanston single mom of two teenage children, had hoped her sister, who was coming in from the Philippines, could donate. When they learned she couldn't, Coyne repeated his offer. Last Wednesday, he was notified his blood and tissues were a match.

Initially Coyne's wife, Emily, had reservations about her husband's gift. But after seeing how much he wanted to do it, she relented. "I just hope he's OK with one," said Emily, a nurse.

Though any surgical procedure carries risk, studies have shown that donors' remaining kidney continues to function normally and will compensate for the loss. "The key is that the donor is in good health beforehand," said Friedewald.

"Life expectancy is about the same and there's no increased risk of kidney disease for the donor," he added.

Coyne doesn't seem worried. His decision, he said, is a way to teach his children there are many ways to give.

"If you think how tenuous and difficult life can be for people around the world, it's nothing," said Coyne, referring to the earthquake in Haiti. "There is a risk of death, but the drive I make to work is riskier than the procedure."

The diminutive and spirited dela Vega, meanwhile, has already told Jewel-Osco store manager Paul Olson her future plans.

"On March 26, I'm on vacation," she yelled across the store after finally opening Coyne's handwritten invitation to Northwestern's Kovler Organ Transplantation Center. "Whether you like it or not!"

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