



How To Increase the Number of Kidney Transplants... By Harvey Myself Founder, Living Kidney Donors Network

If someone you know needed a life saving kidney transplant, would you be willing to donate one of your kidneys to them? More than 16 people a day answer that question with a resounding YES. Understanding why someone chooses to donate, and how they found out about the recipient's need, could be the answer to a growing problem faced by doctors, hospitals and kidney patients.

As of this writing, almost 90,000 people in the U.S. are waiting for a kidney transplant from a deceased donor, and most stay on the waiting list for more than 5 years. Conservatively, that number is expected to grow to more than 100,000 in the next few years. Most patients on the waiting list are on kidney dialysis. (There are over 350,000 people on kidney dialysis....for unknown and medical reasons most of them never get listed.) Their health deteriorates while they wait. In 2009 more than 4,700 people died waiting for a kidney from a deceased donor. This tragedy is avoidable with increased awareness of the need and knowledge of the options that are available.

Medical advances have enabled far easier living donor/recipient matches, (no longer requiring only "related" donors), and laparoscopic procedures often allow the donor to return home 24 to 48 hours after surgery. Paired kidney exchange programs are having a significant impact in facilitating transplants between incompatible pairs. (In a paired kidney exchange, an incompatible donor will donate their kidney to another recipient who also has an incompatible donor.) Recent studies show that kidney donors have the lifespan, hypertension and overall wellness rates comparable to the general population.

Given all the medical advances, reduced risks, and the documented benefits of transplant from a living donor, you would expect the number of living kidney transplants to be increasing. However, they are not. There have been fewer living kidney transplants in 4 of the past 5 years. This is a disturbing trend, especially to experts in the field who recognize the many advantages of living kidney donations and are unable to explain why the number of living kidney transplants isn't increasing. Also, there have been fewer kidneys from deceased donors for 3 out of the past 4 years.

The good news is that over 6,000 living kidney transplants are performed every year - offering life saving benefits to patients and their loved ones. The challenge is finding a way to increase that number.

Hospital transplant programs inform their patients about the importance of finding a living donor. But most patients don't have any idea of how to start the conversation with family or friends. The fear of asking someone to donate is the number one reason given for not pursuing living donation. When polled, donors say they volunteered to donate once they heard about their family member or friend's need, that no one "asked" them to donate. When kidney patients realize that they do not have to ask directly, they become more comfortable in discussing their situation openly with everyone they know – exponentially increasing their chances of finding a living donor. It is critical to develop better education and communication programs to help kidney patients

spread the word about their need for a transplant. We must also educate the public about the need for living donors, and the living donation process. Having accurate and detailed information makes a person more likely to become a donor when they hear that a friend or family member is in need.

Rather than trying to build on the success of the current living kidney option, the transplant community is focusing on three other solutions: increasing the number of deceased donor kidneys, exploring a financial compensation model for donors, and trying to move to a system of “presumed consent” for deceased donations.

Any proposal for compensating donors is vigorously opposed by medical ethicists and many other groups. Each side’s opinions have been hotly debated, but it is unlikely that the two opposing camps will resolve their differences any time soon.

Changing our current donor system to one of “presumed consent” is also controversial. (New York and California are trying to pass laws for “presumed consent.”) With a “presumed consent” policy, every person, upon death, would be considered a donor unless they specifically “opted out.” Again, this type of sweeping change is unlikely to be implemented in the near future.

The current focus of educating the public about organ donation is almost exclusively on increasing the number of deceased donor organs. Millions of dollars are being spent by governmental agencies, private and nonprofit organizations to encourage people to register as organ donor. While these efforts are commendable, and should be continued, increasing the number of deceased donor organs will not be enough to meet the current level of need. Even if all the organs from deceased donors were available, there would still not be enough to keep up with the demand.

Clearly, it makes sense to reallocate some of these resources to help expand the number of living kidney donations, with educational programs for those who need a kidney transplant and to inform the general public. Not only is there a virtually unlimited supply of kidneys from living donors, it is the medically preferred option. A kidney from a living donor lasts almost twice as long as a kidney from deceased donors and it is a safe, successful and cost-effective option. Recent studies show that transplanting someone who is on kidney dialysis saves a present value of \$1 million.

Increasing the number of living kidney donors is the **only way** to reduce the current 5+ year wait for a kidney transplant, and eventually eliminate the waiting list altogether. The solution is within us, the current living kidney donation model can be made more successful.

When surveyed after the transplant, living donors are quick to respond that they would donate again, without hesitation. They are happy with the decision they made, and say they feel a unique kind of pride and contentment - seeing firsthand what a profound impact their gift has had on another human being. A joy that confirms that it is better to give than receive.

When you hear of a friend or family member who needs a kidney transplant, consider being a living donor. Living donors save lives. Give the greatest gift of all....Life Donated, can Multiply Life.

Harvey Mysel is a kidney transplant recipient and Founder of the Living Kidney Donors Network, a nonprofit organization that offers Workshops to educate people in need of a kidney transplant about living kidney donation and helps prepare them to effectively communicate their need to family members and friends. The Living Kidney Donors Network website is: www.lkdn.org and Harvey could be reached at: harvey@lkdn.org