

MARCH IS KIDNEY MONTH

honoring the generous

Everyone feels satisfaction doing good deeds, like opening doors for others, dropping coins in a charity box . . . or giving a kidney to a total stranger.

That's what Sharlene Nielson of Surrey did, for someone she'd just met. Commonly, organs are donated among family or close friends, but it's rare for a live donor not to know the recipient.

In 1998, Adelina Cleave of Langley was given a four-year wait for a kidney transplant (today, about 300 British Columbians are waiting seven to 10 years for a donor kidney). Adelina's health was compromised after becoming ill with a virus in the late 1980s. "This was the time of the 'yuppie flu,'" recalls Cleave. "I came down with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome."

As her health progressively worsened, tests found protein in her urine. Her kidneys were failing. She suffered severe headaches and high blood pressure, among other symptoms. Her children (now adults) were young then and involvement in their active lives became difficult. By 1998 Adelina's family and social life was scheduled around dialysis treatments. This lasted four years until her transplant in May of 2002.

A chance meeting brought Adelina and Sharlene together, thanks to their husbands, both firefighters with the Surrey Fire Department. Mark Nielson had business with Dean Cleave and he stopped at the Cleave's house, en route to Sharlene's doctor appointment – a trip the Nielsons normally didn't do together (destiny, perhaps?).

Their wives were introduced and during that unplanned visit, Sharlene learned of Adelina's health problem and her search for a donor with O negative blood. Sharlene revealed she had the same blood type and immediately offered, "I'm on my way to see my doctor . . . if my doctor suggests it's OK, I'll give you one of my kidneys."

Sharlene recalls speaking purely from instinct, "I didn't even think about it. I spoke directly from my heart because I intuitively knew this was the right thing to do. It just felt so right."

Live kidney donors are screened for physical health, ensuring minimal risks if they're accepted. And Sharlene was. She passed all tests, thanks to her healthy lifestyle (she even meditates regularly). Psychological tests are also necessary for live donors, especially in Sharlene's case.

"They were concerned why I'd do this for a stranger," explained Sharlene. "They had to be sure I was in my right mind!"

A doctor's ethics of "do no harm" is challenged when someone compromises their health for another. When a living donor is a relative, doctors feel confident the benefits to the donor (of saving the life of a loved one) outweigh any risks. However, with live anonymous donors, psychological intentions are less clear: Are they saints or lunatics?

Ken Donohue, acting manager of communications for the BC Transplant Society (BCTS) says Living Anonymous Donors (LADs) are rare, but offer a potential new source for the critical shortage of donor kidneys.

Surveys show 33 per cent of British Columbians are willing to be an LAD; where the donor and recipient remain anonymous. Encouraged by this, BCTS began a clinical pilot to explore the safety and feasibility of live anonymous donations. Two living donations have been done and three more are scheduled, says Donohue.

Psychological profiles of these living donors show they are extraordinary humanitarians – highly altruistic and spiritually driven. Donohue met the first two donors and was impressed by their humbleness. "These are people who feel intense satisfaction just knowing they're giving someone a better quality of life."

Now don't feel guilty if you're squeamish about going under the knife. You're



still doing a humanitarian good deed by donating organs after you've passed on. But an organ donor decal on your driver's license is no longer available. It wasn't effective anyway: Not everyone has a driver's license – or conveniently has it with them when they die.

Make your family aware of your wishes, recommends Donohue. They shouldn't face donor decisions while grieving. In addition, contact the BCTS. They maintain an Organ Donor Registry valid for those with a BC CareCard. This computerized registry is consulted by hospital personnel when you die. To register contact BCTS at 1-800-663-6189 or do it on-line at www.transplant.bc.ca

Organ donors, living or deceased, aren't paid for donating but hopefully the BCTS will soon develop financial support for a living donor's expenses (lost income, travel, etc.). And don't worry about mortgaging the house: British Columbia's Medical Services Plan picks up the tab for transplant surgery.

The kidneys play a vital role, but the human body functions adequately with only one. Why we have two is just another medical mystery, like the appendix and the tonsils. As important as the kidneys are, donating one isn't the dreaded, major surgery many believe.

Suzanne Mihaly of Vanderhoof, recently donated a kidney to her mother. Like Sharlene, Suzanne reports minor discomfort and no health problems afterward. "It wasn't the big sacrifice most of us think." Both women say they'd both do it again if they could.

Adelina Cleave's transplant was successful. She's enjoying good health. But after four years she and husband Dean are still overwhelmed by a stranger's selfless generosity.

"How do you even begin to thank someone for doing something like this?" asks Adelina.

Sharlene's humble reply is typical of all organ donors, "She's healthy. That's all the thanks I need."

For more information see www.kidney.bc.ca

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