
2010

The Surgeon Speaks-Carlo Ramirez, MD, FACS

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Recommended Citation

(2010) "The Surgeon Speaks-Carlo Ramirez, MD, FACS," *Jefferson Surgical Solutions*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://jdc.jefferson.edu/jss/vol5/iss1/2>

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The Surgeon Speaks-Carlo Ramirez, MD, FACS

Transplantation from living donors offers the best outcomes for patients with chronic kidney disease. Unfortunately, only 60 percent of potential living donors are compatible with their intended recipients. Those patients without a compatible donor will have to wait on the deceased donor transplant list, which currently exceeds 85,000 patients nationally, with a median wait time of 4 years.

To facilitate living kidney donor exchanges, Jefferson has adopted a “paired-kidney donation” (or “kidney donor swap”) protocol, which will help patients with potential living donors who are incompatible for blood or tissue type. By collaborating with the Paired Donation Network, we hope to find a compatible donor-recipient pair that will make transplant possible for most of these recipients.

The surgery is identical to a standard living donor kidney transplant, but there are added considerations with a kidney exchange: the timing of the donor operations requires careful coordination to avoid an unfair exchange, where one donor donates while another potential donor does not, resulting in only one recipient getting a transplant.

Surgical Solutions

Kidney Transplant Program Offers Many Options and Encourages Living Donors

Philadelphia is a competitive community for kidney transplantation, and yet Jefferson's 2009 numbers were impressive: 93 kidney and kidney-pancreas transplants. "Thirty-two of these transplanted organs were from living donors," says Associate Professor Carlo B. Ramirez, MD, FACS. "The percentage of living donors grew by 19 percent last year, while the percentage of deceased donors remained the same as the previous year."

Berch Harris is a Jefferson patient who was fortunate to know a donor with whom he was a good match—his wife. He met Vallerie Armstrong in 2002 when he started hemodialysis at a center where she worked. Three years later, Berch had regained kidney function on two separate occasions, and he stopped by the center with information about a product that had helped him. Vallerie gave him her number—it was her last day of work there. They started dating in 2006, began doing at-home dialysis the following spring and married in Berch's native Barbados on December 8, 2007. By that time Vallerie had been tested and deemed a match with Berch. With his history of regaining function, Berch remained optimistic that his kidney would once again kick in. But those hopes were dashed when doctors found a cancerous tumor on his left kidney. That's when he and Vallerie knew it was time to get serious about transplantation.

After having his left kidney removed in July 2008, Berch and Vallerie moved forward with their plan to pursue live donor transplant. In February 2009, Costas Lallas, MD, performed a robotic nephrectomy on Vallerie and Dr. Ramirez (whom she describes as "a fabulous human being") transplanted the kidney to Berch. "We're very blessed that we have been afforded this opportunity," says Vallerie. "Life's just better now, and will continue to get better."



Though the heart is the universal symbol for love, for Berch and Vallerie Harris, the kidney might be a more fitting representation of their shared affection, perseverance and faith.

Dr. Ramirez and three other Jefferson surgeons perform kidney transplants: Cataldo Doria, MD, PhD, FACS, the Nicoletti Family Professor of Transplant Surgery and Director of the Transplant Division; Assistant Professor Adam Frank, MD, FACS; and Associate Professor Warren Maley, MD, who is also Director of the Live Donor Liver Transplantation (LDLT) Program, which launches this spring. For patients less fortunate than Mr. Harris, Jefferson offers other options, including deceased donor and paired donation protocols (see sidebar).

Dr. Ramirez explains that, as one of 6 kidney transplant programs in the city of Philadelphia, Jefferson strives to maximize its patients' chances of receiving a donor kidney. One key to

expanding Jefferson's transplant list is Outreach and Education Coordinator Kim Phillips, RN, BSN, CCTC, who goes out to nephrology practices around the Delaware Valley, to build relationships and coordinate meetings with Jefferson surgeons. "This enables us to get know the nephrologists who refer patients to us," says Dr. Ramirez, "and it fosters good communication. The day after a transplant I always call the referring nephrologist to let them know how their patient is recovering," he notes. "I find that keeping in touch like this means a significant amount—as it does to me with my own patients."

For more information about the Kidney Transplant Program visit: www.jeffersonhospital.org/transplant/kidney

The Surgeon Speaks



Carlo Ramirez, MD, FACS

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