Opinion: It's Time to Reduce Barriers for Living Donors

People who donate part of their liver to save a life should be taken care of––not penalized, says a new opinion piece.

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Every day in the United States, an estimated seven people die waiting for a liver transplant. But it doesn't have to be that way, according to an opinion piece in Stat last week. The article argues in favor of removing major barriers to living donor transplants for people with end-stage liver disease.

The author of the piece, Yuri Genyk, MD, chief of the division of hepatobiliary/pancreatic and abdominal organ transplant surgery at the University of Southern California, starts off by reminding people that living donor transplants are a great alternative to traditional deceased donor transplants. That's because the liver is the only organ in the body that can regenerate—meaning that an individual who donates a portion of his or her liver can expect to have it grow to full size in a matter of weeks, allowing for a full recovery.

Living liver donations often allow people with liver disease to get off transplant waiting lists much faster. This can spare a person years of fighting end-stage liver disease and potentially save thousands of lives. Although living donors are usually friends or family members, anonymous donors can also help out.

However, few hospitals in the country are able to perform the procedure. What's more, living donors often aren't given basic help for recovering—for example, paid time off, guaranteed health coverage, travel reimbursement or accommodations. A donor may be able to use the Family and Medical Leave Act, but that time off is unpaid. Some states offer tax credits to employers who give paid time off to living donors, but these are rare.

Living donors also risk facing "insurance limbo," meaning that their insurance will pay for their surgery and medical expenses for a limited time only. Some insurers cover living donors for only 90 days. In fact, Medicare is the only provider that covers a donor for life. What's more, if the Affordable Care Act (ACA) were to get repealed (and along with it coverage for preexisting conditions), living donors could face never being able to obtain affordable health insurance coverage again.

Genyk concludes by calling for doctors, insurers and health care advocates to work together to help remove the barriers keeping living donors from giving back. Encouraging living organ donations could save thousands of lives and help mitigate a crisis, he writes Genyk. They just need a little bit of financial assistance.

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