Second Chances

HIV-positive donors can give the gift of life to other people who are living with the virus.

June 6, 2016 By Kate Ferguson

In November 2013, when President Obama signed the HIV Organ Policy Equity (HOPE) Act into law, he lifted the ban on transplanting organs from people living with the virus to other HIV-positive recipients. Recently, the bill paved the way for doctors at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine to perform the first transplant procedures of this kind.

“This opens the doors for so many more of these kinds of transplants to happen,” says Dorry Segev, MD, an associate professor of surgery at the university’s school of medicine, “so many more lives of people with HIV can be saved by these transplants.”

According to statistics, more than 121,000 people are on the waiting list for lifesaving organ transplants. Some among them are those living with HIV who suffer from kidney or liver failure and need organ transplants, the current standard-of-care treatment for these serious conditions.

Doctors at Johns Hopkins estimate that each year 500 to 600 usable organs from HIV-positive people are wasted. These discarded organs could save about 1,000 lives each year.

“If we can really reach that [goal], that would be a huge increase in the number of transplants,” Segev adds.

Many people living with HIV have either died or gotten very sick because they’ve had lengthy waits for transplantable organs. But not tossing away “perfectly good organs,” Segev says, changes everything.

Because people living with the virus have better HIV treatment than they used to, many of them live longer and need an organ transplant. According to doctors, generally, HIV-positive patients who undergo organ transplant surgery do well.

Still, people living with the virus who need transplant surgery can wait for organs donated by HIV-negative donors if they prefer.

But because transplant lists are so long, doctors expect that many people living with HIV will opt for a shorter wait for organs from HIV-positive donors.

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