



Organ donation advocate gives a kidney for the cause

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Tim Joos is donating one kidney, but his selfless act could end up helping half a dozen desperately ill people.

Joos is part of a new program at Loyola University Medical Center in Maywood - the first of its kind in the Midwest.

Under the Pay-It-Forward program, living kidney donors are matched with recipients who have another donor willing to help someone else, creating a chain of donations that typically leads to six transplants.

Joos, 53, of St. Charles, has special motivation to help.

When his daughter Samantha got her driver's license, she had signed up to be an organ donor. In 2003, at age 17, she died in a car accident. Her donated heart valves helped save someone's life.

In her memory, Joos began to advocate for people to become organ donors, speaking to thousands of people annually at schools, churches and hospitals.

Eventually, he realized he could practice what he preached by becoming a living donor.

"It's just the right thing to do," Joos said. "You should take advantage of that opportunity to help someone else."

Joos' kidney will likely go to a patient in Philadelphia who matches his blood type.

Three other Good Samaritans are also donating thanks to the program at Loyola - the most ever at one hospital - plus a fourth donor from the St. Louis area whose sister is one of the recipients.

"The whole paradigm is radically shifting," said Dr. John Milner, program director of Loyola's Living Donor Program. Rather than hoarding donors for their own use, as some hospitals do, Loyola's program shares donors with a nationwide registry through the National Kidney Registry.

"We view these donors as national treasures," Milner said, "and not as institutional commodities."

Roughly half of people with kidney disease who need a transplant have someone they know who offers to donate. But a third of the time, the donor is incompatible.

So traditionally, when two patients with incompatible donors get together, they swap organs, and two lives are potentially saved.

Several hospitals in Chicago perform such living donor transplants.

But under the Pay-It-Forward program, each recipient has a donor who agrees to give to someone else, creating a domino effect of donations.

The results are more donations and shorter waiting times, even for those who don't participate in the registry.

And kidneys from living donors typically start working sooner, have a slightly higher survival rate, and last on average 17 years, about twice as long as from a deceased donor.

The announcement of the program at Loyola in Maywood Tuesday was marked by a tearful first meeting between one of the donors, Christina Lamb, 45, of Melrose Park, and her recipient, 21-year-old Robert Rylko of Rockford.

"I'm just grateful to help someone feel better," Lamb said. "I truly believe in the term, 'pay it forward.'"

Rylko, who recently lived and went to school in Schaumburg, said he felt great just 12 days after the surgery.

The transplant spares him hours of dialysis three times a week due to Alport Syndrome, an inherited disorder that can cause loss of hearing and sight. Now, Rylko can eat and sleep normally and plans to go back to college without his lifelong disability.

"I couldn't be any happier," Rylko said. "For someone to do something so selfless is amazing to me. It's the nicest thing anybody could do for someone."

In response to the donation from Lamb, who is a Loyola employee, Rylko's family acquaintance Cynthia Ruiz donated a kidney Monday to Melissa Clynes of Missouri.

In return, Clynes' sister, Sarah, has agreed to donate to someone else, continuing the domino effect.

More than 82,000 people are waiting for kidneys nationwide, but the number of overall organ donors decreased last year, and almost 5,000 patients died while waiting for a kidney.

For those interested in becoming a living donor, Loyola will hold a meeting at its Maywood campus at 7 p.m. Tuesday, April 6. For information, call Dr. Milner at (630) 525-0899, or e-mail jmilner@lumc.edu.