Kidney/pancreas transplant

A second chance at life

For University Hospital transplant recipient Terri McCrae, Easter and its message of rebirth had a special meaning this year. The new kidney and pancreas she received at University Hospital have given the severely diabetic woman what she calls a "second chance at life."

On Monday, April 3, 1995, McCrae, a San Antonio resident for 20 years, made history as the first person to receive a combined kidney/pancreatic transplant at a civilian hospital in Central and South Texas.

The 34-year-old woman received her new kidney and pancreas during a seven-and-a-half-hour transplant operation at University Hospital. Dr. Robert M. Esterl Jr., transplant surgeon at University Hospital and assistant professor of surgery, The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, led the 11-member surgical team who performed the uncommon combined organ transplant.

McCrae is doing well after her successful transplant and is expected to go home by the beginning of May.

"To receive a second chance at life at 34 years old is a blessing," McCrae said. "The opportunity was given to me and I'm glad I was able to take it. I am so thankful to Dr. Esterl and to God, for He is really responsible for everything. Life is going to be different."

A transplant was McCrae's only hope of controlling the progression of her debilitating complications from Type I insulin-dependent diabetes, which she has had since she was 10 years old. She was suffering from the devastating effects of kidney failure, retinopathy (eye disease), neuropathy (decreased feeling in the feet), bladder neuropathy (the bladder empties slower than normal) and gastroparesis (slow emptying of the stomach, which causes nausea).

"I had no complications for so long," McCrae said. "Then one thing happened and it started the ball rolling. I was 27 years old at the time. First it was my eyes, then neuropathy, then kidney failure.

"I had to stop working at the end of 1989, when I went on disability," McCrae said. "I was on dialysis three times per week and in a wheelchair. I was really sick. I couldn't remember the last time I felt good — bad was how I felt all the time.

"But I'm going up the scale now. Every day I feel better and better — I'm ready to hit the mall."

With her new pancreas, McCrae's blood sugar is now normal, and she will no longer require insulin, which she had taken since she was 10.

"I was a human pincushion, getting four shots per day, and doing blood testing four to eight times per day," McCrae said. "With my neuropathy, my nerves weren't sensitive so I had to keep a close watch on my blood sugar, because it would bottom out a lot and I couldn't feel it happening."

Although Dr. Esterl conservatively calls McCrae's transplant a form of control over her diabetes rather than a cure for it, McCrae is hoping her transplant will free her from the wheelchair she has had to use because of the neuropathy from her diabetes.

"I'm anxious to do normal things; things you take for granted, like going for a walk," McCrae said. "I have 12 nieces and nephews, all of them under eight years old. I would like to spend more time with them other than sitting in a wheelchair. Just to be able to go to their birthday parties and really be with them would be a wonderful thing."

It was this desire to have a better quality of life that led McCrae to check into the possibility of having a kidney/pancreas transplant. Dr. Steven Rosenblatt, the UTHSCSA nephrologist she saw for her dialysis, heard of her interest and encouraged her to go to University Hospital for a transplant evaluation.

The organ transplantation program at University Hospital/UTHSCSA had received approval from the United Network of Organ Sharing (UNOS) in June 1994 for its pancreas program.

McCrae met with Dr. Esterl, who had joined the program in March 1994 as a specialist in pancreatic transplantation.

"Dr. Esterl explained everything to me," McCrae said. "I knew the risks and the benefits, and decided it was something I really wanted. My father read up on it and said I had nothing to lose. If it didn't work, I would still be on dialysis."

"At first, my mom didn't have a lot to say. She wasn't real sure how I would take it if it didn't work. In the end, however, she was nothing but encouraging."

"Terri is an extremely motivated patient," Dr. Esterl said. "Both she and her family were well-educated about transplantation. They were up-to-date on the operation."

McCrae had to undergo extensive testing as part of the transplant evaluation process, including lab tests, X-rays, EKG, dental and psychiatric exams. Dr. Esterl said McCrae was fortunate to have a strong cardiovascular system.

"They test every hair on your head down to your toenails," McCrae said. "I was going from one appointment to another hoping to pass each test. You get that far and you're doing good."

McCrae's evaluation was successful, and she was placed on the UNOS waiting list for a suitable donor. After waiting seven months on the list,

Kidney/pancreas Surgical team members

Glenn A. Halff, MD, transplant surgeon at University Hospital, associate professor of surgery at The University of Texas Health Science Center and head of the organ transplantation program

Robert M. Esterl, Jr., MD, transplant surgeon at University Hospital, assistant professor of surgery at UTHSC

Peter Wang, MD, surgery resident

Rowena Baumgartner, third-year medical student

Michelle Lee, MD, anesthesiology resident

Robert Barker, MD, staff anesthesiologist at University Hospital and associate professor of anesthesiology at UTHSC

Larry Vasquez, surgical tech II, operating room

Rod Davis, transplant technician and procurement coordinator at UTHSC.

Kelly Stutes transplant technician at UTHSC

Pamela J. Hernandez, RN nursing care coordinator, operating room

Mary Kathryn Keaton, RN, clinic/staff nurse, operating room

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Dr. Esterl and transplant patient Terri McCrae plan for her dismissal from University Hospital. As Adelante was going to press, McCrae was scheduled to go home and begin enjoying her new life.

Transplant

McCrae received a call at 2 a.m. on Sunday, April 2, that a kidney/pancreas match was available. She was told the hospital still needed to do two more tests for matching and that she would be called back several hours later.

“At 2 a.m., I thought it was a prank call at first,” McCrae said. “When reality hit, my first thought was who do I tell? My voice was shaking and tears were running down my face.”

McCrae was taken into the operating room at 1:30 a.m. Monday, April 3, and was out by 9 a.m.

“My first thought was ‘is it okay?’” McCrae said. “I didn’t really feel pain. I just wondered if I were feeling the way I was supposed to be feeling. Dr. Esterl was very reassuring and positive. He is such a great doctor. Talking to him was a relief. I thought ‘okay, now I can go to sleep.’”

McCrae was in University Hospital’s surgical intensive care unit until April 6, and then moved up to the hospital’s transplant unit, where she will remain for three to four weeks. She will be followed closely by staff of the organ transplantation program, and will take three anti-rejection drugs for the rest of her life.

McCrae is hoping that after a short rehabilitation time, she will be able to leave the nursing home where she has had to live the past three years and go back out on her own.

“I’m anxious to start my second life,” McCrae said. “I can’t sit around all the time. I used to have a condo on my own and I worked as a bookkeeper. It would be fun to do something different this time.”

McCrae, who enjoyed her work as volunteer in the front office of her nursing home on weekends, is considering expanding that experience to be an activities director at a nursing home, keeping older people motivated and involved.

From her experience as a transplant recipient, she wants to encourage fellow diabetics suffering from renal failure to check into kidney/pancreatic transplantation.

“There is hope,” McCrae said. “They learn more about transplants every day. If you’re like me, it can give you a better quality of life. It’s a blessing that my life can start over again.”

By Christiane L. Dahl, APR
Media Relations Coordinator

Coming next month...

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Adelante means toward, onward, higher up! That is exactly where we, the employees, can take our health system. This magazine is about us, about excellence, about where we’re headed and about how we’re getting there.

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