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Local liver transplant program celebrates 25 years

Edmonton home to the second busiest liver transplant program in Canada

EDMONTON – Western Canada's first liver transplant program marks its 25th anniversary next week.

More than 1,400 individuals, mostly from Alberta and western Canada, received new livers through the Alberta Health Services program based at the University of Alberta Hospital, making it the second busiest site for liver transplants in Canada. The program has also driven improvements that have significantly improved patient outcomes and survival rates over the past quarter-century.

"Twenty-five years ago, we hoped a liver transplant would extend a patient's life by 10 years," says liver transplant surgeon Dr. Norman Kneteman, who founded the program with hepatologist Dr. Vince Bain. "Today, between 90 and 97 per cent of transplant patients survive the first year and many live healthy, active lives for another 20 years – and sometimes longer – thanks to advances in surgical techniques and anti-rejection medicines."

Both doctors are still involved in the program. Dr. Kneteman is Clinical Section Chief for Transplant Services in the Edmonton Zone of Alberta Health Services; Dr. Bain the director of the University of Alberta Hospital Liver Unit.

More than 75 liver transplants were performed at the facility last year. Currently, the program has about 120 patients waiting for a liver transplant.

"I don't think we ever would have predicted 25 years ago the volume of transplants today," says Dr. Bain. "But liver disease has become much more prevalent and we are listing patients with diseases who would not have been suitable candidates 10 or 20 years ago. We have a huge opportunity to grow this program further but we are limited by the number of donor organs available. Although the number of transplants performed annually is increasing, the number of patients being referred for transplant has been rising, too. About one in three patients will die before a suitable liver becomes available."

The first adult liver transplant in Edmonton was performed on Oct. 3, 1989; the recipient lived for 15 more years to the age of 69. The first pediatric transplant in Edmonton was performed June 1990 and the patient is still alive. The Stollery Children's Hospital remains western Canada's only pediatric liver transplant site.

Helen Determan – the third patient to receive a liver transplant in Edmonton – will be celebrating the 25th anniversary of her transplant in November.

The St. Albert woman was diagnosed with primary biliary cirrhosis, a disease where the bile ducts in the liver are slowly destroyed, leading to irreversible scarring of liver tissue. She was told, in 1989, she had five years to live.

Determan admits she was nervous about the liver transplant because Dr. Kneteman, then 34, and Dr. Bain, then 32, looked young.

“Dr. Bain looked like a kid to me. He reminded me of my son,” she recalls. “I was nervous to put my life in their hands but one of my nurses at the Royal Alexandra Hospital told me not to worry. She said, ‘They’ll take very good care of you.’ ”

Determan waited two months for a suitable liver. Within days following surgery, her yellow skin turned pink and, after six months of physiotherapy, she no longer needed a cane to walk.

“I still write a thank you note and letter to the donor’s family each year,” says the mother of four and grandmother of nine.

Dr. Bain says more success stories like Determan’s are possible.

“The greatest risk is not in getting through the transplant surgery; it is waiting on the transplant list,” says Dr. Bain. “Waiting is far more dangerous. That’s the sad part. We have the technology and the expertise to save these patients, just an insufficient number of available organs.”

Albertans are encouraged to sign their organ and tissue donor card, located on the back of their Alberta Personal Health Card, register their intent to donate online through the Alberta Organ and Tissue Donation Registry, and most importantly, to discuss their wishes with their family.

The program’s 25th anniversary will be celebrated this week by liver recipients and donors, past physicians and staff, along with the current program’s three surgeons, nine adult and four pediatric hepatologists, 12 co-ordinators, one psychologist, two social workers, four occupational therapists, four physical therapists and four support staff.

The program is supported by the University of Alberta’s Faculty of Medicine & Dentistry, the University Hospital Foundation and the Stollery Children’s Hospital Foundation.

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The University of Alberta’s Faculty of Medicine & Dentistry is home to western Canada’s leading transplant institute. The U of A houses databases that facilitate transplant quality improvement, conducts drug trials with innovative immunosuppressive protocols and trains many of the world’s transplant physicians and surgeons.

The University Hospital Foundation has supported the transplant program since the UAH first pioneered transplants in 1967. Community donors have given more than \$5 million to change and save lives by helping advance transplant patient care at the UAH, and research that has allowed the program to contribute to the international standard of transplant care.

The Stollery Children’s Hospital Foundation supports transplant patients through cutting-edge equipment and programs funded by community support. Foundation donors also support Fellowship training programs for specialists in hepatology.

Alberta Health Services is the provincial health authority responsible for planning and delivering health supports and services for more than four million adults and children living in Alberta. Its mission is to provide a patient-focused, quality health system that is accessible and sustainable for all Albertans.

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