

Extending the Miracle

BY ROBERT S.D. HIGGINS, M.D., M.H.S.A.

Solid organ transplantation is now established as one of the miracle's of modern medicine. Public expectations about our ability to enhance and save the lives of the sickest patients is a testament to how far the field of transplantation has evolved.

On the horizon are many innovative means to improve outcomes with better immunosuppression, enhanced selection criteria and optimizing donor matching. More kidney paired donation programs are just around the corner. New mechanical devices can salvage the sickest patients with advanced heart failure and make them more suitable transplant recipients.

Among the most exciting possibilities are improving the outcomes of kidney transplants and utilizing extended criteria donors. Each of those activities will extend "the miracle of transplantation" to more patients to improve the quality, and length, of their lives.

Nearly 29,000 patients received life-enhancing or lifesaving transplants in 2008. That said, if the system is working effectively to enhance and save lives, then why change it? It is clear, though, that we can do even better.

Policies guiding the use of extended criteria donors and matching them with appropriate recipients require a consensus-driven approach from all the volunteer, medical and transplant staff. These changes in policy do not come without some level of anxiety and concern, but if the overriding principle is to benefit patients and to improve the system, then, in my opinion, we are headed in the right direction.



I believe we have a challenge and a charge to ensure appropriate access to the miracles of transplantation for all U.S. citizens. This access crosses geographic boundaries, racial and ethnic distinctions, and age and socioeconomic barriers. In my opinion, as we think about transplant policy, the issue of access should be an ongoing goal of any new system.

I believe that our transplant system has evolved to be among the most successful in modern medicine, based upon the extraordinary effort of the transplant community. Gifted and hard-working staff at UNOS, in collaboration with tireless volunteer and medical professionals in the field, create a consensus-driven process that allows the OPTN and UNOS to govern the most sophisticated medical delivery system in the world.

We are well positioned to take on challenges in the immediate and long term, and I look forward to the progress we will make that ultimately will benefit thousands of patients. **U**

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Our Challenge: The U.S. Organ Shortage

