

Finding a Match

TTI's paired exchange program makes it happen

BY ADAM BINGAMAN, M.D., PH.D.

“I feel like I have been given my life back.” Those are the words that Ronnie Huegler used to describe how he felt after he received a kidney transplant in March as part of a paired exchange at Methodist Specialty and Transplant Hospital (MSTH) in San Antonio. Huegler, 49 years old, had developed end-stage kidney disease after a long history of diabetes.

Despite dialysis, he continued to work full time as a police sergeant in Corpus Christi, but he never felt truly healthy. His wife wanted to donate a kidney to her husband, but they were not compatible.

They were given new hope, however, by the paired exchange program at MSTH's Texas Transplant Institute (TTI). The Hueglers were one of the first pairs entered into the exchange database in hopes of finding another incompatible pair, and it didn't take long before they had a match.

Alicia White, a 36-year-old registered nurse living in Temple, Texas, had been on home hemodialysis when she was told her husband, who wanted to donate a kidney to her, was not a match.

She researched her options and—after hearing of TTI's paired exchange program—she and her husband were entered into the database. It happened that the Whites were a match with the Hueglers.

Within several weeks of the computer match, the Hueglers and the Whites traveled to San Antonio to undergo the first simultaneous paired exchange done within one center in Texas.

'DOUBLE' AND 'TRIPLE' EXCHANGES

Since the inception of MSTH's paired exchange program, more than 135 recipients and 220 donors have been entered into TTI's paired exchange database. The patients are followed by a dedicated “incompatible team”—as they call themselves—consisting of a transplant surgeon, transplant nephrologist, HLA laboratory immunologist and nursing staff.

The team meets regularly to discuss possible exchange options as well as donor and recipient evaluations.

Since initiation of the program, three paired donor exchange transplants have been performed at MSTH—two doubles and one triple—benefiting seven kidney recipients that otherwise would still be waiting for a transplant.

TTI's exchange transplants have included both crossmatch incompatible pairs as well as blood-type incompatible pairs. Several more paired exchanges are scheduled for upcoming months.



TOP: From left: Ronnie and Karen Huegler, Francis H. Wright Jr., M.D., Steve and Alicia White, and Adam Bingaman, M.D., Ph.D.

BOTTOM: From left (with donor-recipient pairs side by side): donor Emma Martinez with recipient Maria DeLaTorre; donor Victor DeLaTorre with recipient Rebecca Cuellar; and donor Stephanie Gonzales with recipient Delia Gonzales-Silvas

“There is so much to be thankful for at this point in my life—I'm truly blessed,” said Delia Gonzalez-Silvas after her recent transplant as part of a paired exchange. A 45-year-old Tejano singer, Gonzalez-Silvas has performed with her band, Gonzalez y Culturas, throughout the United States and Mexico, including a performance in 1997 for President Bill Clinton.

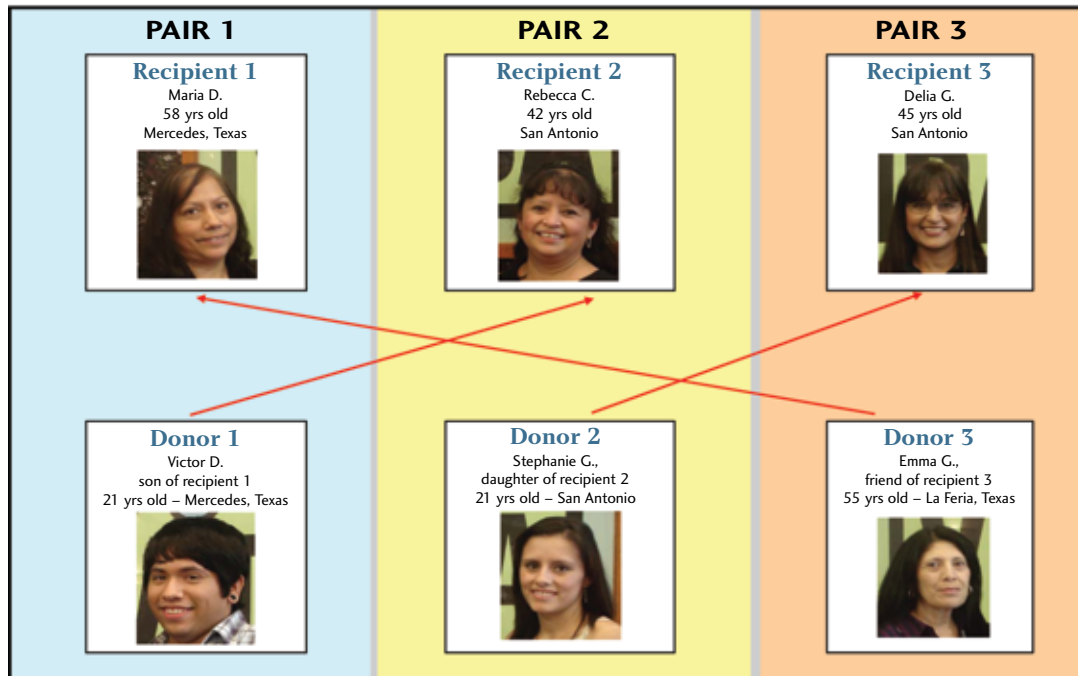
When she began dialysis, however, Gonzalez-Silvas stopped performing to focus on her health. She had hoped to receive a transplant from her friend and fan Emma Martinez, but they were not a match.

Despite that bad news, Martinez remembers dreaming one night that she would be the one to donate a kidney to Gonzalez-Silvas. Her dream came true on July 11, when she was part of the first three-way paired exchange in Texas.

Gonzalez-Silvas now dedicates time to raising money for others fighting kidney disease. She also is attending Northwest Vista College in San Antonio, studying to become a nurse.

KIDNEY TRANSPLANT PROGRAM

Incompatible Donor Triple Exchange—July 11, 2008



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SAN ANTONIO'S LARGE DONOR POOL

MSTH decided to establish a paired exchange program for a number of reasons. Perhaps the most important is MSTH's waiting list of more than 1,500 kidney transplant candidates. That large number of candidates needing a kidney transplant provides a large pool for finding pairs. Additionally, there's much support from family and friends in the San Antonio area who are willing to donate kidneys to loved ones.

"With this kind of support making donated kidneys available and our patient pool—as well as the benefits of living donation—we knew that we had to find a way to save more lives by using the kidneys of healthy incompatible donors," said Adam Bingaman, M.D., Ph.D., transplant surgeon and director of TTI's donor exchange program.

RIGOROUSLY 'CHOREOGRAPHED'

A large number of incompatible pairs—entered into a national computer database or the database of a single center, like TTI—can provide a large number of possible paired exchanges.

But the detailed simultaneous work-ups of donors and recipients, together with issues related to donors or recipients having to travel hundreds of miles to the transplant center, makes the evaluation of the incompatible pairs and management of the program a constant challenge.

As the evaluations of the incompatible pairs are completed, they are scheduled for surgery, setting into motion the next set of logistics handled by the incompatible team. Privacy concerns are paramount in health care and, therefore, all pairs are kept strictly confidential prior to transplantation.


All preoperative and postoperative clinic visits of the pairs involved in an exchange are handled separately, and all staff members are counseled extensively on the confidentiality of the paired donation process.

On the day of surgery, pairs are admitted to the hospital through different areas and taken to separate sections of the preoperative holding room. All donors are taken to their respective operating rooms simultaneously.

During the operations, families of the pairs are directed to separate waiting rooms and, after the operations, the donors and recipients are taken into different areas of the hospital for recovery.

During the most-recent three-way paired exchange, approximately 60 hospital staff members, including physicians as well as nursing and operating-room staff, were involved in the simultaneous care of the donors and recipients.

If, though, the pairs want to meet, posttransplant, the "incompatible team" continues to coordinate—and facilitates the get-together. (And, as shown in the accompanying photos on p. 18, those happy reunions do happen.)

As living donor Stephanie Gonzales said, "When donating my kidney as part of the triple exchange I felt as if I was donating not just to one person—but to three people." A great gift indeed! 

Transplant surgeon Adam Bingaman, M.D., Ph.D., is director of the Texas Transplant Institute donor exchange program at the Methodist Specialty and Transplant Hospital in San Antonio.