

PUBLISHED: 11-02-09

Student gets transplant, research continues

AUTHOR INFORMATION:
Taylor Gleason
tgleason@chroniclemail.com

by [Taylor Gleason \(http://columbiachronicle.com/author/taylorgleason/\)](http://columbiachronicle.com/author/taylorgleason/)

A Columbia student who was unable to continue his academic career this fall semester waited, like many others, for an organ donation this year, but unlike many, he got one.

http://columbiachronicle.com/wp-content/2009/10/hf1102_hearttransplant_01.jpg) On Sept. 21, The Chronicle reported the story of 20-year-old Bill Coon. Coon received a heart and kidney transplant this year, a lucky combination as research shows that patients who need both a heart and kidney cannot do well with only a heart transplant.

“There are an estimated 60,000 people in need of a heart transplant and only 2,000 people a year get transplants,” said Dr. Mark Russo, a Columbia University cardiac surgery fellow. According to Russo, there are a few reasons why so many patients go without the transplants they need.

“There are a lot of organs that are offered, but that are not acceptable for a transplant,” Russo said. “All donors are not equal.”

Factors such as old age or a disease that caused the donor to die might make the available organs unviable for a transplant, Russo said.

“The important thing is that there are so many people in need and it’s so easy [to become a donor],” said Dave Bosch, director of Communications for Gift of Hope Donor and Tissue Network.

Gift of Hope Donor and Tissue Network is one organization under Donate Life Illinois, the state-wide alliance for donation organizations. It is now possible to become an organ donor online at DonateLifeIllinois.org.

While the number of people who need a heart may appear high, Bosch said, “Kidneys are by far the most needed ... 80,000 are waiting for a kidney.”

Nick Urig is a campus campaign manager for Donate Life Illinois. The campaign seeks to register college students in an effort to reach the national goal of 100 million organ donors. Urig has followed Coon’s story closely.

Coon’s first heart transplant was in the first year of his life, Urig said. The medicine that Coon took in order to keep his body from rejecting his newly-donated organ damaged his kidneys.

Russo said that kidney failure is often a side effect of heart failure. For this reason, he studied the success rates of people who get both heart and kidney transplants.

“If we’re going to give away two organs to one person, we’re interested in maximizing the benefits through research that determines which patients have a better chance of survival,” Russo said. “Both hearts and kidneys are scarce, it’s not like there are plenty of organs to go around, so we can’t give organs to just anyone.”

While something is more likely to go wrong with two transplantations rather than one, Russo and his colleagues found that survival rates are about the same between those who receive just a heart and those who receive both a heart and kidneys.

Post-transplant survival is about 10 years for those who received a heart transplant as well as those who received both a heart and kidneys, Russo said.

This is because kidney and heart functions are so closely related. For a heart transplant to be

successful, there must also be a kidney transplant for patients with kidney failure, Russo said.

Russo said his research aims to inform doctors of which patients are better candidates for a transplant “if you have to make a decision between people.”

If a donor provides both a heart and kidneys, Russo’s research suggests a surgeon should not give each to two separate patients, but should consider giving them both to someone who needs both.

The typical journey for those who are in need of an organ transplant begins when a doctor diagnoses end-stage organ failure.

“This means the organs are failing and the patient is referred to a transplant specialist,” Bosch said. “There are nine transplant hospitals in Illinois.”

Some of those transplant centers include the University of Chicago, Loyola University and Rush University. Coon went to Northwestern Memorial Hospital for his transplant this year.

At this step, Bosch said the patient’s name is then added to the national waiting list for organ donations, the United Network of Organ Sharing.

Bosch said that waiting time varies by case. Doctors consider a person’s blood type, how sick they are and how close they are geographically to the donor.

A heart, for example, can travel a maximum of about six hours, Bosch said. So a patient’s odds of receiving a transplant are better if they are located closer to the potential donor.

An organ’s health must be tested before it can be placed in the recipient’s body, Bosch said, and after the tests clear, transplant specialists come to remove the organ and bring it to the recipient.

Coon has now gone through this process twice. Urig reported that Coon is doing well and that his sister, Carissa Coon, made a video to share his story. Urig said they hope the video is informative and encouraging to people who are still waiting for an organ donation.

Popularity: 1% [<http://alexking.org/projects/wordpress/popularity-contest>]