

Split-Liver Transplant

Sandy Kozel:

The day after her twenty-first birthday, Maggie Catherwood got devastating news: a rare disease was destroying her liver, and she was in critical need of a transplant. Months later, when a suitable organ became available, Maggie's doctor gave her an unusual choice.

Maggie Catherwood:

He said it's legally your liver, but there's a very sick baby in the hospital, and that I had the option of, you know, giving that-just a piece of that liver to this baby to save its life, so...

Sandy Kozel:

For Maggie, there was only one answer: let doctors perform what's known as a split-liver transplant, slicing off part of the organ for the critically ill infant. Last week, after successful surgery at Washington D.C.'s Georgetown University Hospital, Maggie got to see her co-recipient, eight-month-old Allison Brown, for the first time in an emotional meeting in the pediatric intensive care unit.

Sandy Kozel:

The procedure's been practiced for about a decade, but it's rare; out of six thousand liver transplants performed in the U.S. last year, only 123 involved split livers. Dr. Cal Matsumoto, who performed Maggie's transplant, says logistics were a key factor in green-lighting the surgery.

Cal Matsumoto:

Number one, you have to get the donor, which is the hard part, uh, getting a very stable young donor that you can do this procedure to, uh, and then you also have to be at a center where, uh, you do both small infants as well as large adults. And all the stars happened to line up, and-and when it became available, that's-that's what we did.

Sandy Kozel:

While these challenges limit the number of split-liver transplants performed each year, organ-sharing networks are considering new guidelines to further encourage liver splitting when a young, healthy organ becomes available.

David DeStefano:

The potential to be able to split a liver and not only increase the number of transplants in the pediatric population, which has, uh, has historically had a higher mortality, but it also would allow us to maybe transplant more adults as well.

Sandy Kozel:

A liver is split most often when the primary recipient is a baby, whose body can't accommodate the full-grown organ. The leftover portion can then go to a compatible patient in the same region of the country. Doctors say pushing more split-liver transplants will greatly reduce the number of infants on pediatric waiting lists.

Sandy Kozel:

For the parents of one baby now off that list, Maggie's generosity makes her a hero.

Terri Brown:

She said yes without hesitation. It's just amazing. And I would think that her parents have to be extremely proud for raising such a wonderful, wonderful woman.

Sandy Kozel:

Maggie has since been discharged and has returned to her home in suburban Washington. Allison is still under observation, but doctors say the piece of liver transplanted inside her should grow to a full-size organ and function normally throughout her life.

Sandy Kozel:

Sandy Kozel, The Associated Press.

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