

Leading a healthy life with one kidney

KUALA LUMPUR: Six years ago when Gordon Ling Fu Chur's wife was diagnosed with kidney failure, he decided to donate one of his kidneys to her without hesitation.

The 34-year-old commercial and documentary director's undying love for Jaslynn Tay, 36, not only helped to save her life but that of their unborn baby as well as she was then in the first trimester of her pregnancy.

It has now been half a decade since the kidney transplantation took place and the couple and their five-year-old daughter Caitlyn are healthy, happy and free from any health complication.

The couple's creatinine levels are at normal levels, with Tay's ranging from 60 to 70 μmol and Ling's at around 104 μmol .

Creatinine levels in the blood can provide information on how well one's kidneys are functioning, with the normal level being below 100 μmol .

Tay said the sacrifice made by her husband has given her a new lease of life as a wife and mother.

"I feel really thankful that I was given a chance to live a normal life. I now enjoy spending time with my family without feeling sick or tired every day," she told Bernama.

While donating a kidney to a family member or close relative is quite common on the basis of familial bonds, how many people are willing to donate an organ to people not known to them?

According to Universiti Putra Malaysia consultant nephrologist and lecturer Dr Nor Fadhlina Zakaria, more than 22,000 patients undergoing dialysis nationwide are awaiting donors to undergo kidney transplantation.

Most of these patients were not able to find a donor from among their family members.

In some cases, family members and close relatives are reluctant to donate a kidney due to a lack of understanding and knowledge on the transplantation process.

"Many of them are worried about their safety and the complications that may arise if they donate an organ," she told Bernama, adding that myths and misperceptions about organ donation prevent some individuals from signing up to be organ donors.

Dr Nor Fadhlina said only around 40 kidney transplantations are performed in Malaysia every year.

"About 90 percent of them involve kidneys donated by living donors while the rest are from brain-dead donors.

"In Malaysia, the living donors are mainly from among the patient's family members. Brain-



Gordon while accompanying his wife to undergo dialysis treatment before the kidney transplant surgery, six years ago. – Bernama photo

dead donors are usually not known to the organ recipient," she said.

Dr Nor Fadhlina, who is also a member of the National Kidney Foundation's (NKF) public education committee, explained that currently there are no cases of patients in Malaysia receiving a kidney from an unknown or random donor in the live donor category.

This, she stressed, is to avoid criminal implications such as illegal organ transactions or trafficking.

"Organ donations from living donors are encouraged but our nation will require detailed legislation to allow this process to take place here," she said.

Malaysia, however, has a panel called Unrelated Transplant Approval Committee under the Ministry of Health to evaluate and give advice on the appropriateness of all transplant surgeries involving a living donor who is not related to the prospective recipient, she added.

Dr Nor Fadhlina also explained that living donors who wish to donate a kidney will have to go through a series of rigid health screenings to ensure that they are eligible to donate the organ concerned.

"Among the procedures both the donor and recipient have to undergo are blood and urine tests, and imaging to scan their lungs, kidneys and other organs," she said, adding that both parties will also have to attend counselling sessions to ensure that they are mentally, emotionally and physically ready for the renal transplant.

According to Dr Nor Fadhlina, human beings can lead a healthy and normal life with just one kidney.

She said a kidney donor's risk of developing complications is low

if they are regularly monitored by a nephrologist. In the case of the recipient, their organ rejection risk factors can be lowered if they comply with their anti-rejection medication regime.

She said donors are advised to observe a healthy lifestyle and eating habits, as well as refrain from carrying out strenuous activities for a period of three months after the transplantation.

"This is because the donor's body is still adapting to one kidney," she said, adding that the length of time the body would need to adapt will vary from person to person.

Once the body has adapted itself to the single kidney, the donor can resume his or her normal activities.

Female donors can have safe pregnancies but must make sure they continue to go for their follow-up check-ups.

Pointing out that organ donation is sanctioned by Islam and other religions as it is viewed as a noble act, Dr Nor Fadhlina said NKF carries out various campaigns to raise public awareness on the importance of kidney care and organ donation.

She said those wishing to donate a kidney to a family member can refer to a specialist. Those intending to donate their organs after death have to register themselves as a donor manually or online.

Organ donation pledge registration forms are available at all government hospitals. Online registration can be done by sending an email to ntrc@moh.gov.my.

"Any individual who wants to be an organ donor must first notify their family members of their intention to avoid any problem later on," added Dr Nor Fadhlina. – Bernama