

## RECEIVING A SECOND CHANCE AT LIFE

**Transplant waiting list:**  
Currently waiting for a transplant as of 1/01/98

Kidney .....	1595
Heart .....	69
Heart/Lung .....	1
Lung .....	125
Liver .....	277
Pancreas .....	96
Cornea .....	202

**430 patients received an organ transplant in 1997**  
**152 patients died waiting.**  
**GIFT OF LIFE - 1-800-482-4881**

## Pending legislation may spur increase in organ donations

BY RENA FULKA  
SPECIAL WRITER

Dr. Robert Higgins sat on a pint-size chair at the Birmingham Montessori School, opening the four chambers of the large plastic heart that served as his visual aid.

"I fix broken hearts," he explained to the 3, 4, and 5 year olds seated around him on the floor. "I'm a heart surgeon."

With his 5-year-old son, John, at his side, Higgins compared the human heart to the engine of a car. "An engine is just like your heart," said the surgical director of the thoracic organ transplant program at Detroit's Henry Ford Hospital. "If you put your hand on your chest, you can feel your heart beating. That's your engine. The good thing is that you don't have to turn it on. It's been going since the day you were born."

The Birmingham doctor went on to emphasize the importance of taking care of the body through healthy eating and by avoiding harmful substances like cigarettes. Then he approached the subject of the work he has devoted his life to since 1993 - organ transplantation.

"I can fix hearts like a mechanic can fix your car. It's really a great thing," he said. "A heart transplant means that when the heart is really broken and there's no way to fix it, we take the heart out and put a new heart in."

Once he steps out of the classroom at 2225 E. 14 Mile Road, Higgins sheds his simplified dialogue as his discussion about transplants becomes more intense.

"Transplantation is a miracle. It's a wonderful thing. Yet people die every day waiting," he said. "We have the technology. We have the ability to save lives. We have the ability to fix the problem. But we don't have an unlimited supply of organs."

Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit has done 210 organ transplant operations since 1985. Survival rates for the first year are 95 percent. Seventy-five percent survive after five years, and 60 percent after 10 years. An individual's decision to donate may save the lives of 10 patients.

Increasing life spans coupled with the aging of the Baby Boomer generation, born between 1946 and 1964, are fueling the growing list of patients in need of organ transplantation. During the last three and a half years, only 14,000 of the state's 9.3 million residents have registered with the Gift of Life Agency of Michigan as future donors. It is not known how many other residents make their wishes known by carrying donor stickers on their driver's licenses.

"People have to understand the reality of the fact. And we need some societal motivation to make it work,"

said Higgins, whose discussions about organ transplants is an important part of his work. "If a patient is declared dead and can help someone else, why wouldn't you give the gift of life? If you'd willingly accept an organ donation, please be willing to give."

Penny Szeman, community education coordinator at the Ann Arbor-based Gift of Life Agency of Michigan, is pushing pending legislation that will help increase donations for the 200,000 Americans currently waiting for organ or tissue transplants.

"The frustration is that 10 people a day are dying," Szeman said.

Having already passed the House of Representatives, the legislative package is in debate as Senate Bill 458. If passed, the bill will require Secretary of State offices to provide every driver's license applicant with information about organ and tissue donation and the opportunity to register. Donation status would then be affixed permanently to the driver's license. The law would also allow for the computerized transmittal of registrants to the Michigan Donor Registry maintained by the Gift of Life Agency. The current donor stickers would then be eliminated.

The Gift of Life Agency employs 21 coordinators throughout the state who can be at any given hospital within an hour to talk with the family of a brain dead patient about the option of a gift of life. Primary organ donors are in good health, but have died through sudden, tragic accidents and been declared brain dead. Though brain function has permanently ceased, the heart and lungs are kept functioning through a respirator.

"In the state of Michigan, a signed, witnessed driver's license sticker is a legal document," said Szeman.

But the family wishes of the deceased are nearly always complied with when the issue of organ donation is presented.

"I have never had anyone say no if there was any indication of a donor wish, and that's true across the country," said Szeman. "The most important thing always is to let your family know your decision."

Organ donation does not conflict with most major religions and costs nothing for the donor family. Registration is as simple as including your wishes on a short form and filing it with the Gift of Life Agency of Michigan. Organ donation options include the heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, pancreas and small intestine. Tissue donations include the corneas, whole eyes, skin, bone, heart valves and saphenous veins.

(For more information about organ donations or to register as a donor, call the Gift of Life Agency of Michigan at 1-800-482-4881.)



STAFF PHOTO BY JEFF KISSEL

Show and tell: With a plastic model of a heart and lung, Dr. Robert Higgins emphasized the importance of taking care of the body to children at the Birmingham Montessori School. His son, John, sits by his side.

## Son provides father with healthy kidney

BY RENA FULKA  
SPECIAL WRITER

Max Dubrinsky of Bloomfield Township had been on the kidney transplant list for 18 months, his condition growing progressively worse, when he was told that unless a perfect match was found, the wait could continue for three more years.

That's when his two sons, Steven and Mark, came forward to propose another alternative. They volunteered to be tested to be living donors for their father.

"It was very hard accepting that. A parent is supposed to give not get," said Dubrinsky, a certified public accountant with an office in Farmington Hills.

"Then I met with clergy to discuss it and they said it was the greatest gift a child could give a parent."

While his sons were being tested near their respective homes, Mark at the University of Chicago and Steven at the University of Alabama, Dubrinsky underwent his extensive battery of tests at William Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak.

Both sons proved to be a perfect match and it was confirmed that Dubrinsky was strong enough to survive the operation. The transplant team then selected 30-year-old Mark to undergo

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STAFF PHOTO BY DAN DEAN

New lease on life: Max Dubrinsky of Bloomfield Township enjoys a happy moment with his wife, Michele, two years after the couple's son, Mark, donated a kidney to save the life of his father.

## Area journalist thrives after transplant

BY RENA FULKA  
SPECIAL WRITER

By the time his new heart arrived at the Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit last August, Lee Sechler of Birmingham had nearly run out of time.

"They told me I had just been hooked up to the heart/lung machine when my original heart stopped," said the 206th patient to receive an organ transplant since the hospital began doing the surgeries in 1985. "They told me I got the heart of a champ."

"It started to beat on its own before it was even sutured and totally put into place," chimed in, Sechler's wife, Louise.

The Oakland County couple has no knowledge of who the donor was or the tragedy that led to the organ donation.

"We do know that it was a young, healthy heart and that the donor and the donor's family are obviously very caring people to make the organ available," said Sechler, editor of *Crysler Times*. "It's nice to have a life again. Both of our children have changed jobs. It's nice to be able to see them move ahead. It's nice to be able to play with our granddaughter. It's nice to know you have a life ahead of you."

Sechler's real struggle for a normal life began after his second heart attack in 1987 caused arrhythmia, an irregular heartbeat. He spent the next seven years on toxic drugs, underwent a 12-hour bypass operation in 1991 and spent three more years with a defibrillator implanted in his chest to monitor abnormal heartbeats. Having exhausted his options for a healthy recovery, Sechler was given an elaborate



STAFF PHOTO BY JERRY ZOLOTCH

Lifesaving gift: On the 130th day after a heart transplant operation gave him another chance at life, Lee Sechler (left) of Birmingham talks candidly about the need for organ donation. Sechler's wife, Louise (right) and daughter, Tracy, keep abreast of his condition by attending a support group at William Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak.

rate battery of tests and placed on the lengthening transplant list last May. Then began his

of the line emotionally and physically," he recalled. "I'd have days when half way through my shower I'd have to stop and rest."

"It was rough. It wasn't a 'by time for our family,' added Louise. "We had a lot of faith, prayers and wonderful friends."

On Aug. 29, at 1 a.m., the longtime journalist received word that a heart had become available. The operation was complete by 10:30 that same morning.

"You're euphoric right after the surgery, knowing you don't have a problem," recalled Sechler, who was up and walking two days later. "But one of the things they point out is that this is not a cure, it's a step. You may have a young, healthy heart, but you're still the same age and your other organs are as old as you are."

With a good prognosis for the future, the Birmingham resident began his formal rehabilitation program earlier this month. Daily anti-rejection medications, monthly tissue biopsies, a healthy diet, an exercise program and a daily log of activities, medications and concerns also help to ensure a healthier lifestyle for Sechler, who says his quality of life dropped to zero before the surgery.

To see him through his recovery, Louise and the couple's daughter, Tracy, joined a transplant support group at Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak.

"It's like we have a whole new family," said Louise.

During his own visits to the hospital, Sechler now shares his experiences with some of the

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