

35 in July

TRANSPLANT CENTER'S MEMORABLE MONTH SHATTERS RECORDS

UCH's Transplant Center, already the busiest transplant center in the region and one of the busiest in the nation, performed a record 35 transplants in July. The count included 17 kidneys, 13 livers and five lungs.

No one really knows why the month was so busy, Transplant Center Director Marge Frueh, RN, MS, concedes. The hospital, on one hand, has been promoting the center aggressively for months, including frequent mentions in its radio ad campaign in June and July and an ongoing focus on marketing through Web search engines. The Web effort alone resulted in 14 appointment requests from May through July, 10 of them from patients new to the system.

Chance also plays a central role in volume. "We had lots of people who were in a position to receive an organ," Frueh says. And although a relatively high number of the organs came from living donors, she adds, "there is a tragic side to [some] of those stories in that someone had to die for that organ to be available."

Intense activity. Whatever the reasons, July included some especially intense periods of activity. For example, the center performed liver transplants on three consecutive days twice during the month; three patients received kidneys on a single day.

"It required a huge amount of work on the part of our transplant coordinators, for example," Frueh notes. "Their pagers can go off any time, day or night – sometimes multiple times a night – alerting them that there is a potential donor match. They have an hour to say 'no' or a provisional 'yes,' in which case they have to get to a computer to get more information on the donor and ensure a good match."

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Large living donor count a plus. Five kidneys and three livers came from living donors in July, also unusually high numbers.

“I believe we performed a total of seven liver transplants with organs from living donors in all of 2007,” Frueh says.

That relatively high number was particularly gratifying, she notes. “We’d like to have six living donors every month. People don’t have to wait as long for an organ when they have a living donor, either a family member or a paired exchange.”

Those on the national waiting list maintained by the United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS), by contrast, may not receive an organ for transplant for three to five years, she says.

Living donors can help patients who don’t have time to wait, Frueh notes. Under the UNOS system, the sickest patients with the greatest likelihood of doing well post-transplant receive available organs first. The order is determined by a “Model for End-Stage Liver Disease,” or MELD score, which is based on lab values and other metrics.

However, she adds, “the MELD score sometimes doesn’t reflect how sick a patient is. For example, a patient with a cancerous liver tumor may have a low MELD score because the cancer hasn’t infiltrated other organs. But if you wait until the cancer metastasizes, the patient is no longer a candidate for an organ.” In those cases, she says, “we look for living donors and counsel patients to find someone who might be willing to do that.”

The Transplant Center doesn’t expect to duplicate its record-setting July pace every month, Frueh says, but it did send an important message by successfully handling the heavy caseload.

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TRANSPLANT CENTER MAINTAINS REPUTATION IN FACE OF COMPETITION

The University of Colorado Hospital's Transplant Center boasts a long record of medical firsts (including the world's first liver transplant, the first living-related transplant in the state and the region's first liver transplant from a non-related donor), and has long been the region's dominant provider.

In July, the hospital's first-ever simultaneous "paired exchange" matched donors and recipients from UCH and hospitals in North Carolina and Alabama. The patients, previously strangers, in each of the locales had not been suitable matches for each other, but were paired appropriately. Surgeons performed the procedures simultaneously at all three hospitals.

Its position, however, has grown somewhat softer in recent years as other hospitals in the metro area have established transplant services of their own.

When it comes to transplant services, recent survey data from the National Research Corporation indicate people in the metro area express a "preference" for UCH, HealthOne and Centura, in that order. The percentage of people with a preference for UCH's transplant services rose to 33 percent in May through July, 2008, up from 30 percent in all of 2007. (The margin of error was 2.6 percent). To compare, some 24 percent of the people surveyed preferred one of the HealthOne hospitals.

Business for the Transplant Center appears to be strong in August, although it's doubtful it will duplicate July's record-breaking volume. For example, eight appointment requests were received via the Web during the first three weeks of August; seven were new to UCH.