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WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA HOSPITAL NEWS

Article

Five Western PA Healthcare Organizations Honored at First National Learning Congress on Organ Donation; Organ Donor Provides Firsthand Account of Experiences and Need to Increase Organ Donations

by John Fries

Imagine what it would be like to be young, vibrant, and energetic—and confined to a hospital room for eight months, not knowing when you'd be released.

That actually happened to Amy Luxner. After a 1998 medical examination revealed that she had tumors around her heart -- a diagnosis her father had also previously received -- she went to Allegheny General Hospital to have them removed. While the tumor removal surgery was successful, her heart wasn't strong enough to withstand the trauma associated with it, so the doctors implanted a mechanical device to help her heart continue to function.

When she awoke following surgery, her doctors told her about the newly implanted device and how it would keep her heart beating for the foreseeable future. It was only a temporary solution, though; she would need to have a heart transplant once an appropriate donor match could be located.

There was one other issue--because the implanted ventricular assist device was only FDA-approved for use within the hospital, she would have to wait for a donor heart in the hospital.

Although no one knew it at the time, this would mean living in a patient room at Allegheny General as the weeks, months, and, eventually, seasons ticked by. Then it happened: eight months after her tumor removal surgery, her new heart arrived and Luxner received the gift of life she'd been anticipating.

Luxner, a Carnegie, PA native and current resident of the Washington, DC area, told her story at the First National Learning Congress on Organ Donation at the Pittsburgh Convention Center. By her side as she spoke was a woman who has become a close friend -- Sandy Granberg, mother of Nicholas Miller, a 13-year-old who died following a 1998 auto accident, and whose heart now beats in Luxner's chest.

The First National Learning Congress, presented by the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) Organ Donation Breakthrough Collaborative, provided an opportunity for attendees to collaborate on initiatives aimed at increasing national organ donation rates.

The Collaborative is a coalition comprised of hospitals, organ procurement organizations, health and government agencies, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/Health Resources Service Organization. Their mission is simple and their message is clear: there's a crucial need for donor organs.

Right now, more than 88,000 people across the U.S. are on organ waiting lists. Of them, 2,200 are in western Pennsylvania.

Several Local Hospitals Awarded Medals of Honor

A key part of the Learning Congress was the presentation of the first-ever Medals of Honor to five local hospitals and one healthcare organization for successfully collaborating with organ procurement organizations to increase organ donation rates. Each was honored for achieving the ODBC's organ donation goal of 75 percent or higher during a 12-month period. They are:

- Mercy Hospital, with an 84.6 percent donation rate,
- UPMC Presbyterian, with a 79 percent donation rate,
- UPMC Shadyside, also with a 79 percent donation rate,
- Hamot Medical Center, with a 75 percent donation rate,
- Altoona Regional Health System, with a 75 percent donation rate, and
- The Center for Organ Recovery and Education (CORE), which collaborated with the hospitals and health systems to improve their rates.

Representatives from these organizations -- CEOs, COOs, patient care administrators, physicians and nurses were among the 2,200 medical professionals, organ donors, organ recipients, and others at the Learning Congress.

Dr. Elizabeth Duke, administrator with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Health Resources Services Administration, presented the Medals of Honor at a formal dinner on May 19.

Underscoring the Need for Organ Donations

Several healthcare executives spoke at a special morning gathering just as the conference was getting underway. All underscored the need for increasing organ donations, echoing a statement by Susan Stuart, CORE's president and CEO.

"Convening the Learning Congress in Pittsburgh is a tribute to the pioneering efforts of the city's four transplant centers, which helped to develop our region into a major U.S. transplant center. The relationships among the 155 hospitals in our region, four regional transplant centers in Pittsburgh and two in West Virginia are, without a doubt, a great example of how effective collaboration can truly save lives."

Elizabeth Concordia, president and CEO at both UPMC Presbyterian and UPMC Shadyside, also recalled the city's heritage and, specifically, Dr. Thomas Starzl's work as a transplant pioneer 20 years ago, "making Pittsburgh the transplant capital of the world."

Ken Eshak, president and CEO of Mercy Health System, spoke of the compassion he's observed in the Pittsburgh area since arriving here last fall.

Oxendale, president of UPMC Children's Hospital, provided numbers that put the need into perspective. "We have 327 children on our transplant list," he said, "but we do about 40 to 50 transplants a year."

Dr. Jeffrey Levine, of Hamot Medical Center, and Kim Spearing, vice president of operations at Allegheny General's transplant center, both spoke of the need to increase organ donations.

Luxner, too, spoke at the gathering about her experience as an organ recipient. She mentioned afterward that, ironically, she has had an organ donor card since she turned 16 -- although at the time, she had no idea about the experience that would lie ahead for her.

CORE's Call to Action

According to CORE, the need for organ donation is greater than ever before. The organization urges families to discuss organ donation, and enthusiastically supports the use of including organ donations in living wills and driver's license registrations.

CORE, founded in 1977, is the federally designated and accredited non-profit organ procurement organization (OPO) serving as the link between those who donate and those awaiting transplant. CORE is the primary call center and intermediary of the local organ recovery and allocation process, providing professional and community education to 155 hospitals and nearly six million people across western and central Pennsylvania, West Virginia and upstate New York.

Since its inception, the organization has assisted with the coordination of more than 300,000 organs, tissue, and corneas for use in transplants.