

Another World Dialysis patients put their lives on hold

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The University of Michigan Livonia Dialysis Unit is a quiet place. Many of the patients sleep away the hours they need to be hooked up to machines.

Suddenly, Mary Lou Szott breezes in on her way to work and their moods brighten. Szott sat in these chairs for up to 3 1/2 hours a day, three times a week, before receiving a kidney transplant from an unrelated living donor in December 2005. She understands what life is like for someone who depends on a dialysis machine to keep them alive by filtering blood as their kidneys would, if working properly.

"I made some real connections with people when I was here," said Szott, a Canton resident who now volunteers her time as a peer mentor for the unit. "I felt I might have something to offer them and learned a lot from patients as well. Friendships were built."

Christy Porter smiles as Szott approaches. The Westland mother has been on dialysis since she went into kidney failure while delivering her son 16 years ago. Today, it's Christopher who keeps Porter going as she waits for a second transplant. Porter received her first transplant in 1995, but the kidney lasted only a few months before her body rejected it.

"Sometimes I read, watch movies. I pray a lot and chit-chat with my peers," Porter said. "They talk about their feelings and needs, whether they be dietary or whatever."

Sometimes the talk turns to Charity, the choir composed of patients, their family members and unit employees. Dialysis technician Karen Schlueter of Farmington founded the group to promote the National Kidney Foundation of Michigan. Porter and friends sang their first song for an audience at Schoolcraft College in March. The event kicked off the May 21 walk to benefit NKF, a nonprofit dedicated to preventing kidney disease and improving the quality of life for those living with it. According to the foundation, diabetes and high blood pressure are related to kidney failure. Diabetes caused 44 percent of kidney failure and high blood pressure 29 percent in Michigan patients in 2004.

"I'm a diabetic. I see this down the road," said Schlueter, nodding to the patients in chairs. "I work with these people every day. Coming here is the hardest thing you ever have to do. You give up control of your body. Since starting the choir, I've received positive responses from patients. They feel they have a purpose."

"Last year I got involved with the zoo walk and learned a lot about NKF," added Schlueter, U-M team captain for the walk. "I explain to patients about the foundation. They help with medications when you can't afford it, promote prevention and organ donation."

Rosalind Thomas is not a candidate for transplant because of her diabetes and heart disease, but supports the efforts of the foundation. The dialysis patient's daughter, son-in-law and 20 grandkids have already raised \$150 for the NKF walk at the Detroit Zoo. Thomas says the organization is creating awareness, not only about kidney disease, but its link to diabetes and the role nutrition plays.

"I wish kids would take into consideration their diet," said Thomas of Livonia. "Kids have more junk food today."

Lupus destroyed David Lyles' kidneys years ago. Today, the 34-year-old Detroit resident writes songs about organ donation while awaiting a second transplant. He received his first kidney in 1995 and has been back on dialysis since 2003, for a total of 16 years. It's David's dream to one day eliminate dialysis.

"The title of the song is Reach Out and Love," said Lyles, who owns the production company which plans to record the song on a CD by the Charity choir. "It's encouraging people to be more giving about being an organ donor."

According to Therese Adamowski, a registered nurse and nurse manager of the U-M Livonia Dialysis Unit, 46 percent of her patients are transplant listed. The peer mentors and a recently begun support group allow all of the patients to express their feelings about dialysis and end stage renal disease.

"When I started (working in the field) 19 years ago, there were fewer patients," Adamowski said. "We're seeing people live longer. It has a lot to do with technology. Technology changed tremendously to better suit what their kidneys would do."

In January, the unit expanded from 12 to 16 chairs, which serve patients on shifts that begin at 6 a.m., 9:30 a.m. and 11 a.m.

"Dialysis is pretty devastating. It changes their entire life," Adamowski said. "They bring in their own pillows and blankets whatever they need to make them comfortable. We have people here for years, from their late 20s to mid 80s.

"It's a huge chunk of your life and a regimented schedule. They like to sit in their particular chair."

Donna Bonds hurries to respond to the beeping from one of the machines. Dialysis technicians spend their days taking blood pressure and assessing excess fluid before programming machines and hooking up patients. Along the way, they find themselves exchanging information about their dogs and children.

"I was a traveler, traveling from unit to unit. I ended up staying at the Livonia clinic because everybody is like a family," said Bonds of Canton. "This was more home. Patients help each other out and even remember each other's birthday. You get really attached to patients."

For more information about the May 21 walk, call (800) 482-1455 or visit www.nkfm.org.

Schlueter and the choir are doing their part by performing at area churches to raise money for the National Kidney Foundation of Michigan and to cover production costs of making the CD. For more information, call Schlueter at (248) 797-9499.

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