

Two Sallisaw brothers celebrate a transplanted kidney that's still going strong

BY DEBORAH BRAUSER
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When Sallisaw native Murel Copeland heard that his brother needed a kidney he said, "Won't mine work?"

That led to them both undergoing the first living-related kidney transplant procedure done in Wichita, Kan., on Nov. 3, 1981. It was considered a success then and remains so all these years later.

"I didn't realize it would last so long, really. But apparently he's taken very good care of it," Murel said. "When asked if it's actually all of the quality of the kidney he gave up, he laughed and replied, 'I wasn't going to say that!'"

Older brother Hayes of Sallisaw was more serious when he simply said, "His gift meant everything. It meant freedom to travel and to have a normal life. And I can never repay that."

DEGENERATIVE KIDNEY DISEASE

Hayes' physical condition didn't look good about 35 years ago. He started having serious kidney problems and was soon diagnosed with having degenerative kidney disease that may have been caused by a childhood bout of strep throat.

The news was serious enough that when he wanted to get married, his Wichita nephrologist Hugo Weber, MD, asked to speak to his fiancée first.

"He wanted to make sure I knew what I was getting myself into. Hayes and I really didn't know how much time we would have together. But there was no way anyone was running me off," Kathy Copeland said.

By the age of 36, Hayes faced complete kidney failure and was told he either needed to get a kidney transplant or start dialysis

treatment. His whole family offered to be tested as possible donors, but it was younger brother Murel who proved to be Hayes' perfect match.

Together, they toured the only available facility for the procedure at that time, which was unfortunately three hours away from Hayes' home. In addition,



Hayes Copeland, standing, and Murel Copeland, in bed, right after the transplant as Mark Blackmore, transplant coordinator, presents a shirt that means "St Francis Hospital 1st Living Related Donator"

some of the pre-operation processes left the brothers feeling uncomfortable.

Fortunately, a world-class kidney surgeon was getting ready to relocate.

Charles Shield III, MD, came to Wichita from San Antonio, where he was performing transplants while in the U.S. Air Force.

He met with Hayes and told him he was putting together a new team, which became part of the St. Francis Hospital Kidney Transplant Program, but that it would take a while for the team to get acclimated to each other.

Feeling comfortable with all he heard, Hayes said he'd wait and went on dialysis for almost six months. This involved being hooked up to a dialysis machine for four hours, three nights a week.

PROCEDURES

One week before the scheduled operation day, a last-minute test revealed that Hayes' gallbladder, right kidney and spleen, and a nerve causing stomach ulcers needed to be removed. At first, it was suggested that recovering from this procedure would postpone the transplant

derwent full-fledged open surgery with an eight to ten-inch incision. In addition, his kidney had a rare feature.

"He had three renal arteries that I had to make into one. A lot of people thought I was crazy for doing a transplant with a live donor who had that, but I knew I could make it into one — and make it do well with no problems," Shield said.

Still, Murel was shocked when he woke from his surgery to see Hayes standing in the doorway of the recovery room.

"My first thought was that they hadn't even given him my kidney yet," Murel said.

They had, but the hospital staff had Hayes get up just an hour after surgery



Brothers, Hayes on the left and Murel Copeland celebrate 30 years of life after a kidney transplant.

to start walking the floors.

"They told me that immediately after he would start going uphill and I'd be going down, but then it would level out and I'd start moving up. And they were telling the truth."

Murel went home after three days but Hayes remained in the hospital for nearly two weeks so that his new kidney could be monitored.

GOING STRONG

Today, Hayes takes anti-rejection medications, has periodic check-ups with a nephrologist in Fort Smith, Ark., and even checks in periodically with Dr. Shield.

"The last time I saw him I said, 'We're coming up on the 30-year mark. How many more do you think I have with this kidney?' And he said, 'In your case, probably a lifetime.'"

Shield and his team, which are now affiliated with Via Christi Regional Medical Center, have been involved with all 356 kidney transplants from a living related donor that have now been performed in Wichita.

Although the procedure is still hard on donors, Shield's team now mostly uses laparoscopy to remotely remove the kidney,

a piece of cake either. After all these years, I don't even think about having only one kidney," Murel said.

Shield reported that the oldest living-related kidney transplant he performed was 34 years ago.

He said that research has shown that, on average, 95 percent to 97 percent of long procedures involving a perfectly matched sibling will have a kidney working successfully at the end of a year. Of these, half will be working 30 years later.

With non-related live donors, the figures drop down to 90 percent to 95 percent after one year, with half working 20 years later.

A perfectly matched deceased donor has a one-year kidney survival of around 93 percent to 95 percent and a half-life of 14 years. Non-matched deceased donors have similar one-year kidney survival rates and a half-life of 10 years.

So, because Hayes and Murel were perfectly matched, Shield said he's not surprised that his kidney is still going strong.

"I expect to have many more visits with Hayes. I believe he's going to die an old man."

After all they've been through, the brothers remain close and celebrated several major anniversary milestones. At 10 years, they held a large party; at 20 years, they were welcomed back for a celebration thrown by the hospital; and at 25 years, Hayes and Kathy took Murel and his wife on an Alaskan cruise.

"I'd like to do even more for him. He gave me life. I don't know where I'd be right now if he hadn't done what he did," Hayes said. "I don't know about all that, but will say it's the best thing I've ever done and I've never regretted it. And if I had it to do over again, I'd do it," Murel said.