Canadian Doctors Transplant Lungs From Hepatitis C–Positive Donors

In the era of next-generation cures for the virus, new possibilities abound.

June 21, 2018 By Casey Halter

Doctors in Toronto have successfully transplanted lungs from donors with hepatitis C virus (HCV), giving sick patients a second chance at life and then curing them of the virus, Canada's CityNews reports.

Since last fall, surgeons at Toronto General Hospital have performed hepatitis C-positive transplants in 11 patients as part of a pilot project designed to study the safety of using lungs from infected donors. Current protocol in North America prohibits the use of these organs, but, based on the efficacy of next-generation treatments, doctors have begun questioning this policy.

These transplants are possible because of a dome-like device known as the ex-vivo lung perfusion, which was developed in 2008. The device bathes donor lungs in a special solution that can remove up to 85 percent of residual blood in the lungs that carries the hepatitis C virus.

Post-surgery, recipients were tested for hepatitis C and started on a 12-week course of prophylactic treatment to prevent an infection. So far, doctors say eight transplant patients have finished their therapies; two are still undergoing treatment, and one has yet to receive medication.

A new policy permitting the use of HCV-positive organs could provide a huge boost in organ donation, adding roughly 1,000 more lung donors per year in North America. What's more, as the opioid crisis continues to claim lives, the number of hepatitis C-positive donors is likely to go up.

The study results were presented at this year's Global Hepatitis Summit, which took place last week in Toronto. Going forward, researchers say the procedure could likely expand to include lung, kidney and heart transplants as well as transplants of the pancreas and small bowel.

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