Hepatitis C Cured in 20 People With HCV-Positive Kidney Transplants

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In 2016, two bold clinical trials at Johns Hopkins University and the University of Pennsylvania offered 20 people in need of kidney transplants to skip the waitlist if they were willing to accept an organ with hepatitis C virus (HCV).

This week, doctors announced that all 20 people who received the donated organs — and subsequently contracted HCV — have been cured thanks to next-generation antiviral treatment, Science Alert reports.

Organ donations from people with hep C haven't been possible until now with the advent of highly-effective treatment for the virus. Historically, kidneys with HCV have been discarded. However, now that new direct-acting antivirals offer cure rates upwards of 90 percent, doctors across the country have become more open to stretching these rules for people who would rather have the organ first, then cure HCV later.

For the first trial, a transplant team at the University of Pennsylvania approached 38 kidney transplant patients on dialysis that had been waiting for a donated organ for at least one and a half years. After being informed of the procedure and its risks, 14 provided their consent, with 10 of this group being selected for the experimental surgery.

All of them contracted hep C when they received their transplant, but researchers say all of the group managed to beat the virus after a 12-week course of Zepatier (elbasvir/grazoprevir), Merck's latest NS5A inhibitor. A similar but separate trial conducted on 10 people at John's Hopkins University yielded similar results.

Transplant experts say the promising results of the experimental surgeries could help open up an entirely new pool of donor organs for those in need of a transplant, and potentially save the lives of tens of thousands of people currently waiting to receive a new kidney in the United States.

Moving ahead, the researchers want to expand the trials. The University of Pennsylvania is now extending the trial to 10 more dialysis patients, and plan to conduct more studies in the future — possibly transplanting HCV-positive hearts, livers and lungs donated by people with the virus.

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