Lifelong Liver Disease Survivor Offered New Chance With Hepatitis C–Infected Organ

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A 26-year-old man dying of liver failure has been given a second chance at life after a team of doctors at Massachusetts General Hospital allowed him to undergo an experimental liver transplant using an organ infected with the hepatitis C virus (HCV).

The surgery is part of a growing trend across the United States that allows patients to jump ahead on transplant waiting lists if they're willing to accept the additional risk of accepting an HCV-positive organ, Fox News reports.

Ben Blake, the recipient of the surgery, underwent his first liver transplant at 7 months old. However, the organ started failing while he was in college, and Blake says he has spent the better part of his adult life in and out of the hospital for various illnesses. He was recently placed in the intensive care unit and put into a medically induced coma because of his condition, but due to the high-demand for organs in Massachusetts, he still couldn't get off the transplant waiting list.

Normally, hepatitis C–infected organs are transplanted only to patients already living with the virus so as not to further its spread. Most often, U.S. hospitals will discard HCV-positive organs. But when doctors at Massachusetts General Hospital proposed a transplant involving an HCV-positive organ last month, Blake's family jumped at the opportunity.

Because current hepatitis C treatments are successful in more than 90 percent of cases, Blake's doctors said the benefit of receiving the infected organ far outweighed the risk of HCV infection. In addition, Blake began taking hepatitis C treatment prior to his surgery to help kick-start his body's response to the virus. It's been nearly a month since the surgery, and Blake's doctors say he is responding well to both the new liver and his hepatitis C treatment. They are expecting him to fully recover.

Meanwhile, the United States is experiencing a major shortage in donated livers, which leaves more than 120,000 people waiting for lifesaving surgery every year. Current data from the United Network of Organ Sharing (UNOS) show that 22 people die each day waiting for a liver transplant in this county, and every 10 minutes, someone is added to a transplant waiting list.

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