Surgeons Gear Up to Use HCV-Positive Hearts for Transplants

May 19, 2017

Surgeons at the University of Pennsylvania are getting ready to test transplanting hearts from donors with the hepatitis C virus (HCV) into healthy patients on organ waiting lists, STAT News reports.

According to researchers, the idea is to help cut down on wait times for patients in need of lifesaving organs and to take advantage of an influx of otherwise healthy donor organs from individuals who have died of overdoses amid America's ongoing opioid crisis.

U Penn's announcement comes shortly after a transplant study using HCV-positive kidneys demonstrated major success. The study, published last month in The New England Journal of Medicine, reported that all 10 patients in a trial who underwent the experimental surgery and received hepatitis C treatment post-operation recovered from the liver virus so quickly that none suffered any effects of the disease.

Today, doctors say most of the hearts donated by patients with hepatitis C are thrown away. Generally, only transplant candidates who also have hepatitis C are eligible to receive these organs. However, surgeons argue that hearts from HCV-positive donors are often much younger and healthier than other organs coming through the system, and with the advent of new, highly effective antiviral treatment for hep C, they have become more willing to transplant these organs into noninfected patients.

An ongoing organ shortage in the United States also appears to be driving the heart transplant initiative. Last year, U.S. surgeons conducted nearly 3,208 heart transplants, but nearly 4,000 people were left waiting for one. Adding hundreds more organs to that pool could help save lives.

But price is a major concern for potential recipients of organs from HCV-positive donors. Currently treatment for the liver virus can run as high as $95,000 per patient for a standard 12-week course, and doctors fear insurance companies may not be easily convinced to pay for both a transplant and subsequent HCV treatment.