Two New Pilot Studies Transplant Hepatitis C–Infected Kidneys

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New pilot studies at the University of Pennsylvania and Johns Hopkins University will allow patients on kidney transplant waiting lists to jump ahead in line if they are willing to receive an organ infected with hepatitis C virus (HCV), PBS reports.

The two major transplant centers are betting that the strategy will save lives by potentially allowing hundreds more kidneys to be transplanted at their facilities every year. Plus, according to researchers, the trade-off of getting a new kidney years sooner (but with a highly treatable infection) is less dangerous than ever.

Both studies have been prompted by a major organ shortage across the United States. Today, more than 99,000 people are on the United Network of Organ Sharing's (UNOS) national kidney waiting list, but only about 17,000 people end up getting a transplant each year. Nearly 4 percent a year die waiting.

Meanwhile, the nation's opioid epidemic is prompting a major spike in donations from people who have died of overdoses. These organs are typically younger and, absent an infection risk, would be highly sought after.

Normally, hepatitis C–infected organs are transplanted only to patients who are already living with the virus so as not to further the spread of the disease. Giving HCV-positive organs to HCV-negative recipients is allowed if the patient agrees, but it's very rare in this country. Most often, hospitals will discard hepatitis C–infected organs.

The small studies were funded by Merck & Co., which donated the medication Zepatier for everyone receiving an HCV-positive organ. While the studies may be a good first step in reducing transplant waiting lists, much larger studies will be needed in the future to assess whether the use of these organs in immune-suppressed transplant recipients works on a bigger scale.

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