Rare triple-organ transplant gives life to Louisville woman

Dawn Nelson had a lot to celebrate at the one-year anniversary of her double-lung and heart transplant at UK HealthCare. And celebrate she did, with friends and family gathering in July at her family home in Louisville to give thanks to the organ donor who made her renewed life a reality. “I like to say that my life began April 12, 1983, and was restored by my organ donor on July 7, 2012.”

Before Nelson’s rare combined heart and double-lung transplant, the then-29-year-old woman could barely walk from her bed to the bathroom, much less do simple chores. She only weighed 80 pounds. She was 18 when doctors told her she had systemic lupus erythematosus, 22 when diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis. At 25, she developed pulmonary hypertension, a deadly disease that was destroying her lungs and causing her heart to fail. Her dreams of going to medical school and starting a family were shattered.

In 2010, she sought care from Wesley McConnell, MD, a transplant pulmonologist with Kentuckiana Pulmonary Associates in Louisville. In May 2011, after drug therapies failed to help, Dr. McConnell referred Nelson to the UK Transplant Center.

“Dawn was extremely ill, and it became clear that her only chance for survival would be a heart-lung transplant,” McConnell said. “I knew that UK was her (continued)
best option because they had the most experienced team in the state.”
She entered Albert B. Chandler Hospital in April 2012, knowing she would die there without a heart and double-lung transplant. She received her new lungs and heart in an eight-hour procedure on July 7, 2012, performed by UK transplant surgeon and center director Charles Hoopes, MD. It was the first of its kind in Kentucky in 15 years and only the seventh such procedure at UK since the transplant program began in 1964. Only 27 combined heart-lung transplants were performed nationwide in 2011, the most recent year for available data.
“A lot of people like Dawn die waiting for a transplant; she was at the right place at the right time,” McConnell said. “Dr. Hoopes took a chance on her and it worked out.”

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– Wesley McConnell, MD, Louisville transplant pulmonologist

McConnell continues to provide follow-up care for Nelson, as does UK’s Navin Rajagopalan, MD, medical director of heart transplantation and director of UK’s Advanced Heart Failure Clinic.
Nelson’s regained health enabled her to re-enroll at the University of Louisville for fall 2013 as a junior majoring in biology. She shelved plans to be a doctor, instead choosing a career in crime scene investigation. Plus, she gives her time working with organizations such as the American Lung Association to raise awareness about the need for organ donors.
“I want more time to enjoy my life and enjoy what I’m going to do, always remembering to celebrate my organ donor who gave me this gift,” said Nelson. “I can never fully express or show my never-ending gratitude towards them.”

Transplant program one of collaboration
Hoopes said the success of Nelson’s rare heart and double-lung transplant exemplifies the changing focus of the UK Transplant Center. Instead of emphasizing surgery, the center is embracing a regionalized view that includes the complex diagnosis and management of organ failure, as well as follow-up care after transplant surgery. This requires close working relationships with community-based physicians throughout the Commonwealth.

In November 2010, in collaboration with Norton Healthcare, UK opened an outreach Transplant and Specialty Clinic in Louisville to provide convenient, comprehensive pre- and post-transplant care for patients such as Nelson. UK’s Organ Failure and Transplantation Network works with physicians throughout the region in the treatment of end-stage kidney failure.

“Organ failure is a public health issue,” Hoopes said. “Through outreach and organ failure networks, we can impact the progression and management of diseases that may result in end-stage organ failure, increasingly improving patient outcomes and quality of life.”

This includes use of assistive bridging therapies that keep patients alive while they await donated organs, as well as efforts to improve organ donations.

In fiscal year 2013, UK’s transplant team performed 163 organ transplants, including Nelson’s procedure. Most of the transplants were for kidneys (84), followed by liver (40), lung (19), heart (14), and kidney/pancreas combined (5). Nationwide, more than 28,000 lives are saved through transplantation each year. An estimated 6,000 people die annually while waiting for an organ transplant, with more than 119,000 Americans currently waiting for donated organs, including 900 people in Kentucky.

For more information on UK’s Transplant Center call 859-323-1691 or 866-285-4337 toll free. You may also visit our website at ukhealthcare.uky.edu/transplant/.
To learn more about becoming an organ donor, visit the Kentucky Organ Donor Registry donatelifeky.org.