Speaking Up About a Silent Killer

Kidney Disease Poses a Big Challenge, but Dialysis Gives Me Hope for the Future—A Patient’s Perspective


By Frank Sietzen, Jr.

My diet is now rich in foods I once ignored: fresh fruit and vegetables, fish, and rice. My last pizza was in 2006, a lifetime ago. Instead of Key lime pie, I eat a bowl of berries. I must also control how much liquid I consume. If the machine removes too much fluid during a session, I could face extreme fatigue and muscle cramping. But leaving too much fluid could cause congestive heart failure. Without regular dialysis or a kidney transplant, I would live a few weeks at most, doctors tell me.

Diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, vascular disease, or a family history of kidney disease puts a person at risk for kidney problems, according to the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, or NIDDK. I had three of those five factors when my kidney disease was diagnosed in 2007. My doctors initially treated me with medication and diet. But eventually, my kidneys failed; dialysis and transplant were the only options left to keep me alive.

In a sense, chronic kidney disease is a silent killer stalking large parts of the population. The Congressional Kidney Caucus estimates that 80,000 people die each year, making it the ninth-leading cause of death in the country. Blacks are particularly at risk. Half of the country’s African American population has at least one risk factor for kidney disease, according to an April 2008 report in the American Journal of Kidney Diseases; 30,000 reach end stage kidney disease every year, a rate four times greater than for whites. But less than 3 percent of African Americans consider kidney disease a top health concern, the study found.

The ultimate solution for failed kidneys is to get a new one. Last December I spent half a day undergoing tests to be approved for the transplant list. Nurses took a dozen samples of my blood—ouch! Once each month I must send new blood samples. More tests, including yearly stress tests, are required later to show that my heart could withstand the surgery.

The Kidney Foundation estimates that 1,177 Washington area patients are waiting for a kidney along with me; nationwide, an estimated 17,000 kidney transplants were performed in 2005.

There are days when the management of my many illnesses can seem overwhelming. The probability of survival one year after beginning dialysis, according to the NIDDK, is 78.3 percent. After five years, that rate drops to 32.1 percent. After a decade on dialysis, the survival rate is 10 percent, according to a study of patients from 1995 to 2005.

I’m hoping to beat the Washington area’s average wait—five to seven years—for a kidney transplant. I’m hoping to beat the Grim Reaper, too.

Life with kidney disease isn’t easy. But it is a life well worth living.