

'Paired transplant' hailed as 'miracle' for two families

Computerized system matched Beaver Creek, Atlanta donors, patients.

By [Mary McCarty](#) and Natalie Knoth
Staff Writers

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Larry Back of Beaver Creek and Becky Carlisle of Atlanta made history Wednesday as the first "paired transplant" in the Dayton area.

Dr. William Rundell performed the successful three-hour surgery Wednesday afternoon at Miami Valley Hospital — the area's only transplant center. At Piedmont Hospital in Atlanta on the same day, Carlisle's husband Richard received a kidney from Back's son Charlie.

Becky Carlisle wasn't a match for her husband and Charlie Back wasn't a match for his father. The two families found each other through the Toledo-based organization Alliance for Paired Donation, which utilizes a computerized system to match recipients with donors.

Both the donors and transplant recipients were recovering beautifully by Friday afternoon. "What you're looking at here is a miracle," Back said Friday, looking tanned and relaxed as he held the hand of his donor. Carlisle, meanwhile, looked as if she had just stepped in from a garden party, rather than recovering from major surgery.

"He's my buddy," Carlisle said, smiling and chatting as if the two were lifelong friends. They actually met Tuesday night when Carlisle flew in for the surgery.

"She's my hero," Back said, "and my son's my hero."

Noted Rundell, "It was a good day when everything went well. There was a very mutual appreciation for the other family, and an appreciation for the bravery of both donors."

Back, 70, has a great deal in common with Richard Carlisle, 68, his fellow kidney recipient in Atlanta. Both have been on nightly home dialysis; both are avid golfers who have severely curtailed their daily activities. Both desperately needed a new kidney to survive.

"Dad was in the hospital with angina for a week, and we were afraid we were going to lose him," said Back's daughter, Nicole Dale of Beaver Creek.

"It was beginning to affect me emotionally and physically," Back admitted. "I was wondering if I might have only a few more years."

Becky Carlisle also was frustrated that neither she nor the couple's two grown daughters proved to be a match for Richard. The paired transplant was arranged through the Toledo-based organization Alliance for Paired Donation, which utilizes a computerized system, developed by

transplant surgeon Michael Rees about six years ago, to match recipients with donors. Each recipient must register at least one donor and may register more than one to increase the odds of finding a match.

"Clearly the best thing for patients is to have as many people in the pool as possible," said Laurie Reece of the Alliance. "It increases the chances of finding a match."

Since the first paired kidney exchange was performed in 2000, a total of 1,318 non-biological, unrelated paired kidney exchanges have taken place nationwide, including 51 in Ohio. It was only the second live-donor transplant at Miami Valley Hospital this year, Rundell said, reflecting a local and statewide trend this year. Organ donations in the Dayton area are down by 50 percent this year, and locally, only 38.46 percent of families have consented to organ donation in 2011.

"It's a statewide problem, and nobody knows why it's happening," Rundell said. "It's always cyclic, but in 30 odd years I've never seen the decrease that we have seen this year. Everybody is scratching their heads over this. For the patients, it means they sit on a list waiting, because there just aren't the donors."

Part of the reason may be positive, Rundell acknowledged: People are wearing seatbelts more often and bicycle and motorcycle helmets. He hopes such trends will be countered by an increase in registered organ donations as well as innovative solutions such as paired organ donation.

"It's wonderful," Rundell said of the paired donation trend. "We want to help patients, and this is a new method."

The pool of donors is limited to begin with, since only 1 to 2 percent of people die from brain death, a virtual prerequisite for organ donation. Brain death can occur from severe trauma to the head, brain hemorrhage, stroke, drowning or gunshot wound to the head.

A living-donor kidney is preferable to a deceased-donor kidney because it lasts about 15 to 16 years, versus about eight to nine years. About 20 percent of registrants find a compatible donor through the Alliance, one of several national networks for paired donation, Reece said. Potential recipients are removed if they become too ill, find a relative match, or decide on a deceased organ donor instead.

Each recipient is matched with a donor based on blood and tissue typing, closeness in age, and location relative to each other. Other medical conditions must also be considered.

On Friday afternoon in Atlanta, Richard's daughter Samantha, of Vinings, Ga., said her father was doing remarkably well after the procedure.

"He's wonderful. Absolutely wonderful," said Samantha, 34. "As soon as he came out of anesthesia, he was up and going. I'm just flabbergasted by the whole thing."

Charlie, a government teacher at Beavercreek High School, said Friday he was feeling sore and had difficulty moving, yet was doing well for being two days out of surgery. He expected to return home July 13.

Though the donor and recipient pairs were once strangers, they are forever bonded, both physically and emotionally.

"It's definitely a personal decision, nothing you should be pressured into, but understand that you're giving someone a new lease on life," Charlie said. "It's the best gift you can give."

Back in Dayton, his father and newfound friend Becky Carlisle concurred heartily. Dr. Erik Weise removed Carlisle's kidney by making four incisions in a robotic surgical procedure that makes for an easier recovery.

"I highly recommend being a donor," Carlisle said. "If I can do this, anybody can do this. I don't like doctors, I don't like hospitals. But if you do this, it's a high like nothing else you can experience."

Back and Carlisle bade affectionate farewells Friday afternoon, promising to arrange a golf outing between the two families.

For more information about becoming a living donor, call Miami Valley Hospital's transplant center at (937) 208-3577.

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