

Kidney transplant program earns best quality score in US

How quality scores matter to patients when choosing a hospital

When Candice Noble was 32 years old, she was hit with a double whammy: she was diagnosed with lupus and she needed to go on dialysis. At the time, her daughter was nearly 2-years-old and her son was just 6 months old.

She became one of the thousands of people across the country on the waiting list for a transplant.

In the United States, all organ transplants are regulated by the federal government because the procedure is covered by Medicare. The United Network for Organ Sharing, or UNOS, is the agency that regulates and manages transplants across the nation.

"UNOS gathers data from transplant centers including factors and statistics for quality of the organ and the quality of the recipient," explains Dilip Samarapungavan, M.D., medical director for the organ transplant program at Beaumont Hospital-Royal Oak. "UNOS uses social security numbers to track patients through the medical system, so if they move out of state and need follow-up care, they will be able to record that."

Candice learned about this data and researched centers offering transplant. She was listed with the University of Toledo, near her home in Ohio, as well as another center. But with her husband working full time and her health declining, she decided to move to California to be with her mother. There, she was put on the transplant waiting list at Stanford University.

Even while she was in California, she continued to research other programs. It's important for anyone doing this kind of research to know that the Scientific Registry for Transplant Recipients uses the data collected by UNOS to estimate the likelihood of patients being alive one year post transplant. "Very strict standards come into play here," explains Dr. Samarapungavan, who goes by "Dr. Samar" (pronounced "summer, like the season," he says). "All centers are expected to be as good as or better than the national average. Transplant centers live and die by these statistics. They take into account obesity and other traits, weighing each risk factor to make the scores equitable and comparisons fair."

Looking at the data for Beaumont, it's clear we have a strong program, but it wasn't until this year that Dr. Samar and the team were able to learn how the quality of the program ranked nationally according to the Scientific Registry of Transplant Patients. An acceptable hazard ratio for a program is 1.0. When the data was released, Beaumont's hazard ratio was .32. The best in the nation.

This means the kidney transplant program at Beaumont has the best post-transplant survival rates of any other transplant centers in the United States. "We've known for a while that we had the best program in the state based on our scores," says Dr. Samar. "But to find out we have the best ratio in the nation is wonderful for our patients and a testament to the team."

For seven years, Candice researched programs, looking for one that made her comfortable and had the data to back it up. "When I made my decision to go to back to Michigan and ultimately Beaumont for my transplant care, I took all the scores into consideration," she says. "Beaumont's survival scores were just as good, if not better, than many other programs. From the first phone call, they listened, gave me lots of information and followed through on what they said. I felt really comfortable."

Finally, on Jan. 15, Candice experienced a kidney transplant with the best program in the country. Now, eight months later, "I'm starting to feel like my seven- years-ago self," she says. "I'm going to the gym now and my kids are amazed. They didn't know anything different than me going to dialysis."

Dr. Samar knows what makes the difference for patients like Candice. "We have an amazingly dedicated team," he explains. "Every member works hard and is focused on trying to achieve the best possible outcome for our patients. It's not a numbers game for us. We want every patient to have a name and a face and we treat them like friends. Our clinical processes also make us stand out. In most organ centers, offers are given to coordinators who use checklists. Here, an experienced physician looks at the organ. We also tailor medication protocols to patient needs, which gives them the best advantage. The rest is hard work and dedication."

Beaumont Hospital – Royal Oak is the only organ transplant center in the eight-hospital system. The kidney transplant program started in 1972 and has completed more than 2,000 transplants. A liver trans-plant program opened in 2010, completing up to 18 procedures per year.