

LIFE EDITOR: CAROL JANKOWSKI
894-2231 EXT. 2640
cjankowski@therecord.com

SECTION F

LIFE & health

FRIDAY, JULY 29, 2005

CLASSIFIED - F4

For exercise equipment, check Sporting Equipment 1090 under Marketplace.



MONDAYS: Learning • TUESDAYS: Life on the Run • WEDNESDAYS: Life at Home • THURSDAYS: Trends • FRIDAYS: Health

PANCREAS TRANSPLANTS

No more diabetes

Chance of a normal life worth undergoing surgery, Kitchener recipient says

STORIES BY ANNE KELLY
RECORD STAFF

Judy Wilhelm couldn't contain her excitement as she rushed to pack a suitcase just before midnight on May 30. She ran out on the veranda of her Kitchener home and yelled, "Oh my God!" at the top of her lungs.

The call she'd received moments earlier from Toronto General Hospital, saying they had a new pancreas for her, had come much sooner than expected.

Wilhelm, 41, had just been returned to the active transplant registry on May 25 after being delisted for six months because a stubborn foot infection required surgery.

Now, in just a few hours, Wilhelm's dream of being free of insulin injections, daily blood testing, regimented eating and further complications from diabetes would start to come true.

She had been a diabetic since the age of 13, but a new pancreas would give her that freedom and also preserve the function of the deteriorating donor kidney she received in 1994.

Pancreas-after-kidney transplants are relatively new. The Toronto General site of the University Health Network intro-

duced them in 2002, and has done just 16 since then, largely due to a shortage of donor organs.

Wilhelm was first put on a waiting list in June 2004, but planned to take herself off it in February so she could be with her mother, who had been diagnosed with lung cancer. Mother and daughter live together and Wilhelm says her mother was always there when her daughter was ill.

But the family wouldn't hear of it, insisting Wilhelm must not give up her chance for a normal life.

Twenty minutes after the 11:40 p.m. phone call May 30, Wilhelm was on the road with her sister, Deb, and brother-in-law Dale MacPherson, of St. Jacobs.

"It took us about 50 minutes to get there," she recalled. "There was nobody on the road, which was great."

The 4 a.m. transplant was preceded by a battery of tests and X-rays. As she waited, she thought about the 24-year-old donor who had died hours earlier.

"I think she was involved in a car accident. They don't usually tell you a whole lot about the donor."

Now, as the donor's pancreas functions beautifully inside



DAVID BEBEE, RECORD STAFF

A diabetic since she was 13, Judy Wilhelm underwent a pancreas transplant on May 31. The Kitchener woman is now free of insulin injections, regimented meal planning and further complications from diabetes.

Wilhelm, her desire to know more about the young woman grows. She'll give the survivors time to mourn, but eventually hopes to contact them by letter or phone.

"I want to find out what kind of a person she was. Was she married, did she have children? I just feel like I want to tell them how grateful I am."

"I feel so bad when I hear about someone dying in a traffic accident or an accident, period. It's unfortunate they die to give a life to somebody else. I'm just so fortunate to have two chances at life."

Wilhelm was also fortunate to have family to transport her back

and forth to Toronto General three times a week for follow-up tests and monitoring after her nine-day stay in hospital.

And as she grows stronger each day, Wilhelm relishes that new freedom without injections.

She has a 30-centimetre incision scar from the bottom of her breast bone around her navel and down to her groin as a reminder.

But "I don't have to eat on time. I can eat just a little. I can eat what I want. My blood sugar (levels) are perfect."

"I feel better, I'm really making progress every day. It's just such a burden off my shoulders

(that) I don't have that routine anymore," she said.

Although medical experts warn pancreas transplants are not a cure for diabetes, Wilhelm disagrees.

"It's my cure. I would never call it not a cure."

She still takes handfuls of medication — 15 pills first thing in the morning, one at lunch and 18 at night — to prevent organ rejection and regulate her blood pressure, iron and hemoglobin.

However, because poor health forced her to give up her secretarial job years ago, she hopes to work part-time again. And she's keen to travel, maybe

take a cruise.

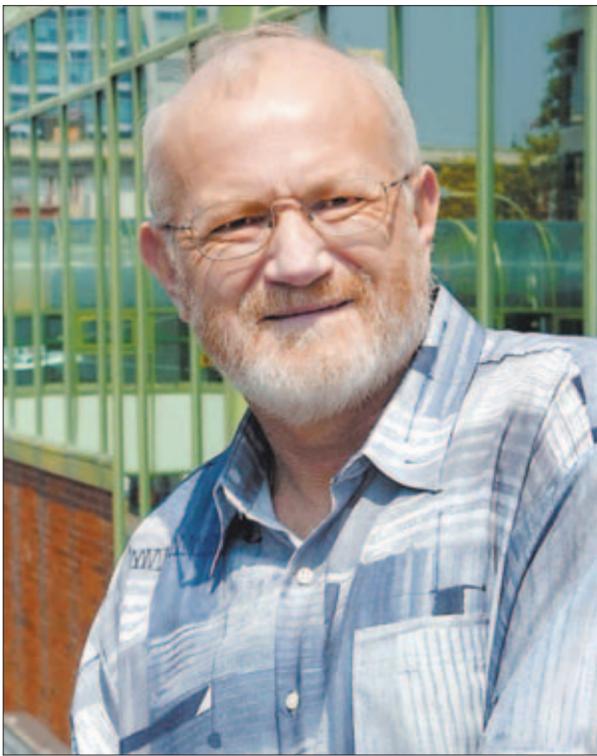
"The future looks very bright," she said.

Her only regret is that her father, who died six years ago, couldn't share in her joy. He always encouraged her to keep herself as healthy as possible so that when a cure came, she'd be ready.

"I really wish he could have been here to know that the miracle happened," Wilhelm said. "I say I'm the cat with 10 lives."

She stressed the need for organ donation.

"If people didn't sign their donor card, there would not have been this chance for me." akelly@therecord.com



ROBERT WILSON, RECORD STAFF

Pancreas transplant recipient Earle McCormick is enjoying more energy, less worry and the freedom of no longer taking insulin injections.

Enjoying his freedom

Despite the anti-rejection medication, Earle McCormick feels free

Earle McCormick and Judy Wilhelm haven't met yet, but they'd have a lot to talk about.

The two are part of an exclusive club of just 16 pancreas transplant recipients at Toronto General, the only hospital in Ontario that does them. The hospital started in 2002.

Wilhelm is one of five people who have received a donor pancreas there this year. Another four received a pancreas in 2004. McCormick, 50, received his on Aug. 2, 2003.

The Record wrote about both of them last year. McCormick was celebrating his first year with a new pancreas and Wilhelm was still waiting.

McCormick continues to enjoy excellent health.

The freedom from insulin injections, coupled with his increased energy and reduced threat of diabetes-related complications, spurred him to leave the security of his job with Scotia McLeod to start his own business.

Today he is a financial strategist, working with doctors and entrepreneurs, and also sells critical illness insurance.

His days are no longer structured around his meals and he doesn't need frequent rests.

"I eat what I want, drink what I want," McCormick said.

His wife, Loretta, and their children, ages 16 and 13, are also enjoying a family life that no longer revolves around his illness.

"My kids now look at me as if I'm normal — as normal as a parent ever gets."

EARLE MCCORMICK
PANCREAS TRANSPLANT RECIPIENT

"Probably my kids now look at me as if I'm normal — as normal as a parent ever gets," McCormick joked. "They had to make a lot of compromises."

He has experienced some sleeplessness since the surgery.

But he sees it as a fair tradeoff after years of battling a disease that led to kidney failure, dialysis and a transplant with a kidney donated by his sister in 1995.

He also lost much of the sight in one

eye and some sensation in his feet.

McCormick had a scare in March when he suffered a month of intestinal illness, during which the level of anti-rejection drugs in his system started to rise inexplicably.

"I lost 25 pounds in four weeks," he said. "I survived on rice and crackers. I couldn't keep anything inside me."

Doctors had to make sure he wasn't starting to reject the pancreas.

But it appears an extended version of Norwalk virus, commonly known as stomach flu, disrupted the drug levels. His doctor lowered the anti-rejection drug dosage and within four hours, McCormick was feeling better.

There is a fine line with anti-rejection medication, McCormick explained. If the dose is too low, the body starts to reject the donated organ; too high and it becomes toxic to the patient's system.

McCormick visits Toronto General once a year for tests, a small price to pay for his improved quality of life.

"The freedom I get now is just remarkable," he said.

akelly@therecord.com



PERSPECTIVES

It was carved into the earth by floodwaters as the last ice age ended. European settlers who arrived in the early 1800s weren't impressed. They used it as a garbage dump. But today it's one of this area's great natural attractions. Reporter Brent Davis tells the story of the Elora Gorge.



THE RECORD

LOOK FOR IT TOMORROW.

WORDS TO LIVE BY.