Transplants & Substance Use Disorders: Important Conversations to Explore Before Donation

Halee V. Stroup, MS, NCC
Specialty Counselor & Independent Living Donor Advocate
University of Pittsburgh Medical Center
UPMC’s Living-Donor Liver Transplant Program

Commitment to provide liver transplant services to all who will benefit, including those who other transplant centers deem high-risk or unfit for transplant.

Responsibility to protect patients from potential negative outcomes (medical & psychosocial) vs.
Responsibility to protect patient autonomy.
Potential Living Donor

- Male in his 40s, seeking to donate to biological sister
- Medically and surgically appropriate for donation
- History of severe alcohol use disorder, sustained remission 9 years
  - High-intensity exercise is an important coping skill in his recovery
- No history of treatment for substance use disorder, but active in his local peer support recovery community
  - Numerous discussions with his sponsor prior to evaluation
  - Donor’s intention was to view his donation as a “no strings attached gift”
- No history of mental health diagnoses, no current symptoms
Potential Recipient

- Caucasian female in her 40s with alcoholic cirrhosis of the liver
- History of alcohol use disorder, severe in remission for a shorter period than the recipient
- Pathway to addiction recovery, treatment and maintenance different from potential living donor’s experience
Conversations with Living Donors: When Donors Have Substance Use Disorders

• What is your current recovery status?
  • History of treatment for substance use disorders?

• How do you maintain your recovery?
  • How would you adapt post-surgery?

• What are your thoughts about taking pain management medications?
  • Plan for medication management?

• How would you feel if you experienced a relapse?
  • Would you expect to regret your choice to donate?
Conversations with Living Donors: When Recipients Have Substance Use Disorders

• Do you know why the recipient needs a transplant?
  • If the need for transplant is related to substance use disorders, what are your thoughts about this?

• How would you expect yourself to feel if the recipient experienced a relapse post-transplant?
  • Would you expect to regret your choice to donate?
  • How would you expect it to impact your relationship with the recipient?
Takeaways

- Ensuring informed consent means talking through a variety of potentially distressing outcomes with potential donors.
- A framework for these important conversations is needed, but individualized discussions are typically necessary.
Co-Investigators

Abhinav Humar, MD
Deborah Maurer, RN, MBA
Emily Tillman, MS, MSW, LSW
Sarah Whitaker, MSCP
Vikraman Gunabushanam, MD
Jennifer Steel, PhD

Karen Emmett, BSN, RN, CCTN
Aileen Gallatin, MSED, BSN, RN, CCTC
Swaytha Ganesh, MD
Christopher Hughes, MD
Andrea DiMartini, MD
Jerrad Dixon, CRNP

Special thanks to all the living donors who give the gift of life.
Questions & Case Discussion