Saving Lives and Improving Health Care Through Innovation In Organ Donations And Transplants

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There are currently more than 120,000 people on the waiting list for an organ in the United States. Twenty-two people a day die waiting.

But today, we're taking one step forward to change that. In honor of National Donate Life Month, the President issued a Proclamation that solidifies his Administration's commitment to shortening the organ waiting list, emphasizing that "across government, industry, academia, private organizations, and the medical and philanthropic communities, we must all do our part to lift up donors, donor families, and patients by supporting efforts to shorten the organ waiting list."

Today's Proclamation builds on the action this Administration has taken to improve outcomes for individuals waiting for organ transplants and support living donors.

Each year, approximately 6,000 Americans make the selfless decision to become a living organ donor, facilitating life-saving kidney and liver transplants. Thanks to the Affordable Care Act, individuals who have donated organs have access to health insurance without worrying whether their donation will be considered a pre-existing condition.

The HOPE Act signed by President Obama in 2013 laid the groundwork for the first HIV-positive to HIV-positive transplants in the United States. This week, surgeons at Johns Hopkins announced that they had performed the first-in-the-world HIV-positive to HIV-positive liver transplant and the first-in-the-U.S. HIV-positive to HIV-positive kidney transplant. These medical successes will pave the way for as many as 1,000 people a year in the United States to have access to life-saving transplants that would not have been possible before.

But there is still more we can do. The vast majority of the organ waiting list is made up of people waiting for a kidney transplant. These Americans are hoping for a life-saving transplant that can add more years to their lives. In addition to the tremendous human cost, the kidney waiting list carries a huge cost to the public purse; Medicare pays more than $34 billion per year – more than the entire budget of the National Institutes of Health – to care for patients with end-stage kidney failure.

A recent transformative innovation called kidney paired donation (KPD), which pools living donors and recipients to increase the likelihood of matches, can improve this. In order to increase the number of potential transplants, the Department of Health and Human Services launched a nationwide KPD program in 2010 to build on this practice.

Drawing on the spirit of innovation that President Obama spoke about in this year's State of the Union, seven government agencies have now invested nearly $3 billion over a 3-year period in the future of bioengineering to advance our understanding of wound repair and organ and tissue regeneration and preservation.

Part of the answer will be continuing to invest in scientific breakthroughs that redefine what is possible in bioengineering. Just a few generations ago, living without kidneys was unimaginable. But that changed thanks to Dr. Willem Kolff, a Dutch immigrant who brought his invention of the dialysis machine to the United States after World War II. As we seek to create the future we want to live in, we must harness this spirit of hard work and creativity to help shorten the organ waiting list.

Towards that end, in the coming months, senior Administration officials will host a Summit at the White House to highlight the role of innovation in organ donation and transplantation, discuss the challenges we face, and lift up commitments to meet them. As the President said in his Proclamation, "we recommit to supporting the researchers, innovators, advocates, and medical professionals working to reduce the number of people awaiting vital organ transplants."

But there is still a simple and profound part that Americans across the country can play in this challenge to reduce the organ waiting list. More than ninety percent of Americans support organ donation, but only a fraction are registered to donate themselves. Helping ensure that more people are aware of donation opportunities is a crucial first step. To register as an organ donor or learn more, visit www.organdonor.gov.

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