Living donor kidney transplant chain brings recipients ‘back to life’
BY Art Golab
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Kidney transplant patients Paulette Behan of West Chicago (center), and Don Terry of Joliet (right), and transplant surgeon Dr. John Milner discussed the role that Loyola University Medical Center doctors, patients and donors played in the world’s longest kidney transplant chain, involving 30 transplant patients and 30 living donors.

A year ago, an electrical contractor named Rick Ruzzamenti walked into a California hospital and offered to donate a kidney, no strings attached.

This set into motion what became the world’s longest living donor kidney transplant chain, which ended at Loyola University Medical Center in Maywood when a Joliet man became the last of 30 people to receive a kidney as a result of Ruzzamenti’s original donation, according Loyola medical officials.

“This kidney chain has brought me back to life,” said Don Terry, 46, of Joliet.

Another Loyola patient, Paulette Behan, of West Chicago, was the 12th patient in the chain as it hopscotched back and forth across the country.

Donor chains, a fairly recent phenomenon, evolved because often it is not enough for someone suffering from kidney disease to find a family member or friend to donate a kidney.

The kidneys must match. But many times, even among family members — they don’t.

Ruzzamenti’s original no-strings donation went to a man whose niece wanted to give him a kidney, but was not a match. However, in return for the kidney that went to her uncle, the niece donated her kidney to someone else who did match, according to a New York Times story chronicling the chain.

And the chain continued until it ended in December at Loyola with Terry, who had no living donor, but was among the best available matches for the last kidney.

Every chain begins with a Good Samaritan donor, who places no conditions on where the kidney ends up. And every chain ends with a recipient who does not have a living donor.

Chains are assembled by computer software that examines millions of possible combinations and spits out chains of matching donors with the tap of a keyboard.

Without a matching friend or family member, patients must wait 5 to 10 years for a kidney from a deceased donor. But patients participating in a chain get a live kidney within six months, Loyola transplant surgeon Dr. John Milner said Sunday.

Loyola was the first area hospital to participate in a national kidney chain, The University of Chicago Hospitals also make use of kidney chains.
Such chains could vastly increase the number of kidney transplants, but not until enough people participate, Milner said.

“There are people right now today in this city who have willing healthy living donors who don’t match their recipients but don’t know about this program, Milner said.

The record-breaking chain did not begin at Loyola, but the hospital has started 13 other chains. Five were initiated by Loyola employees who donated their kidneys.

Currently, only 268 patients and their living donors are in the National Kidney Registry database used by Loyola. But 100,000 people are awaiting kidney transplants. Most are on dialysis treatments, and thousands die every year.

If all those patients and their potential living donors participated in chains, it could increase transplants by 30 percent, Milner said. More Good Samaritans are also needed to jump-start new chains.

“I’m here because I want to see more people [getting transplants], said Don Terry, the final link in the chain. He watched five of the friends he met in dialysis die.

“There are 100,000 people dying before you,” Terry said. “Please make sure that there isn’t one more who has to.”