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After Two Organ Transplants

By: *By AL CAMPBELL*

ERMA — Faith, love, caring and prayers carried Carol Baals through two organ transplants this year.

She looks forward to Christmas at home surrounded by family, because someone's loved one decided to give the most precious gift: a liver, and by it, life.

The journey of pain and faith of the Baals — Carol, her husband Robert, and children Lauren, Meredith and Joshua, took them to doctors' offices, hospital operating rooms, and now on the long road to recovery.

About 15 years ago, Carol, 49, was diagnosed with polycystic kidney disease (PKD). Over time, cysts took over her kidneys. Slowly, they lost function. Some live with medication, others, may need dialysis or, like Baals, a transplant.

Christmas 2003, Baals "really started feeling bad." The holiday was dimmed. Four years prior, her brother had been tested as a potential kidney donor. At first, he appeared to be a match, family members usually are, but surgeons, at the time, were reluctant to use his kidneys since they had multiple arteries.

"Last Christmas, I had to be hospitalized because my kidney function was not good at all," she said.

She was in need of a transplant or dialysis.

"It was frustrating," she said. "My blood (Type O) was a bit combative. Even though we had a lot of people offering, all were ruled out."

Then, another person asked Baals to reconsider her brother as a donor. Retested, and "to my surprise, they did more in-depth tests and found my brother was not a match. I feel it was God's will that they didn't go along with using him before," she continued.

Two children of her "dearest childhood friend," Anne Willets Hoyle, offered Baals a kidney.

It was decided that Hoyle's 21-year-old daughter, Mary Anne Hoyle of Marlton, would be the donor, since she was single.

"She (Hoyle) was delighted that her children were interested in offering and were considered candidates," said Baals.

"She was very supportive, even though some told her because she was young, it was crazy to do that. But she was so interested in being able to improve my quality of life," said Baals.

On May 13, at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, the dual operations took place.

Hoyle's kidney was removed using a robotic laparoscope, since it is less invasive, and was more precise than a human surgeon could do manually.

"Healing time is much faster," said Baals.

As the donor was undergoing her procedure, Baals was being prepared.

That meant both her kidneys, weighing about six pounds each and 12 inches long, or roughly double the normal size and weight, were being removed.

The operation was successful, but problems arose shortly afterward.

"I had the same condition (cysts) that affected my liver," said Baals.

During the kidney surgery, surgeons tried to "deroof" the cysts, "hoping that would make me more comfortable," she said.

About a week after surgery, complications started to arise.

Ascites, or fluid accumulation in the abdomen, had begun.

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"Doctors were mystified," she said, "My legs swelled up, and I gained 20 pounds of fluid in my abdomen. I was not doing well. They were afraid I might not make it."

Over the course of the next two months, Baals was hospitalized for 55 days, many of them for tests, "trying to rule out all kinds of blood clots and complications," she said.

Doctors surmised Baals' liver had been propped up by her kidneys. Once removed, the liver, the body's largest organ, shifted and started to compress other organs, causing the fluid build up.

Finally diagnosed with Budd-Chiari Syndrome, clotting of the hepatic vein, the major vein leaving the liver, Baals was deemed in need of a liver transplant.

During that time of crisis, "My dear husband (employed in Bayside State Prison's administration) was at the hospital every single day. The nurses marveled at his faithfulness," said Baals.

The couple's children were also there regularly, as was Hoyle.

"We are very strong Christians. We had all kinds of people praying for us," she said.

The Baals are members of the Lighthouse Church, Christian and Missionary Alliance, which meets on Sunday mornings at Middle Township Elementary School No. 2, West Pacific Avenue.

Using the internet, Robert and the children would regularly "send about 30 e-mails updating people," said Baals.

Those "people" were around the globe, said Robert.

"We got responses from China, Mexico and all over the United States. We were on prayer lists of churches around the country," he said.

"It was really heart warming, one of the things that encouraged us to keep hopeful, and sure that things would turn out okay," said Carol.

It was August, and the future looked dark.

"She needed a full liver transplant, and we had no visibility. That was so discouraging," said Robert.

"She was getting sicker and sicker. If you get too sick with liver disease, they can't do a transplant," he said.

"There was a small window of opportunity," he said.

Scored highly for a liver transplant, Baals wasn't given much hope by the University of Pennsylvania hospital.

One of Robert's friends in the medical field mentioned the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville, Fla. The clinic claims, on its Web site, to have one of the shortest waiting periods for such transplants, 1.7 months, on average. Although Mayo Clinic wasn't covered by Baals' health insurance, and it could have cost hundreds of thousands of dollars that their carrier refused to cover, Baals said, "We were ready to do whatever needed to be done.

"If I had to sell the house, so be it. It came down to I wanted my wife, if it was in a trailer or a tent," said Robert.

In their moment of turmoil, and with all preparations made to fly to Florida for an extended time, "We really felt at peace about it. God's the one who opened doors and closed doors. He'll tell us to do what was right," said Carol.

"It was Sunday night, and we were alone at that kitchen table. We were in each other's arms in tears," said Robert.

"We were not wanting to go, but it was our position if this was the door God opened for us, Carol would have to stay," said Robert.

A day passed, and on Monday night, "We were both sound asleep at 11:45.

The phone rang. Bob answered it. The voice on the other end of the line said, "This is the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. We have a liver, a good liver for your wife. Be here in an hour and a half," she said.

"We made it there in about 55 minutes," said Robert.

"There was no traffic. We were just ecstatic to get up there. Once we were there, they started testing on my liver," said Carol.

Surgery began at 8 a.m. and six hours later, with Dr. Marty Sellers as lead surgeon, the procedure was done, thanks to a 38-year-old female who chose to be an organ donor.

Carol's on the road to recovery. She still takes anti-rejection medications, and will for the rest of her life. Still, she's grateful to that woman to whose family she will write to express her sentiments.

Like many, Carol "did not contemplate" the importance of organ donors, until her life was saved by two of them.

"I'm back walking, and have full energy I haven't had for a long time," said Baals "And I'm looking forward to this Christmas as being really special."

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