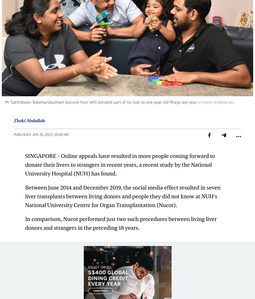
Social media appeals lead to more liver transplants from strangers



Mr Sakthidalan Balathandautham (second from left) donated part of his liver to one-year-old Rheya last year. (© PHOTO: SCMAH.WS)

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PUBLISHED JUN 26, 2022, 05:00 AM

SINGAPORE - Online appeals have resulted in more people coming forward to donate their livers to strangers in recent years, a recent study by the National University Hospital (NUH) has found.

Between June 2014 and December 2019, the social media effect resulted in seven liver transplants between living donors and people they did not know at NUH's National University Centre for Organ Transplantation (Nucot).

In comparison, Nucot performed just two such procedures between living liver donors and strangers in the preceding 18 years.



Each such appeal can lead to upwards of 10 people offering to donate a part of their livers, said Associate Professor Shridhar Iyer, surgical director and senior consultant in the Adult Liver Transplant Programme at Nucot.

"We find that people come forward asking to donate livers, even though it is a major surgery, to somebody they don't know," he told reporters on June 17.

These donors then have to be assessed on their suitability for the procedure, he said.

Donors should be above 21, be in good health and meet other conditions such as having a blood type compatible with the patient.

Prof Shridhar noted that smokers and those with fatty livers can also qualify as donors, should they be assessed to be suitable after stopping smoking and making diet and lifestyle changes.

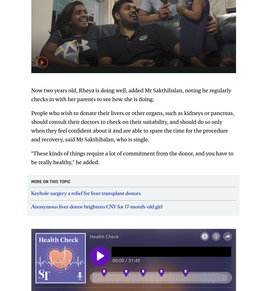
In liver donations between two adults, the right side of the liver - comprising about 70 per cent of the organ - is donated, with Prof Shridhar noting the remaining 30 per cent is sufficient to regenerate the organ.

Donors will be able to recover and perform most normal activities within a month, and be able to do more strenuous activities within six weeks to three months after the procedure.

Most cases of living liver donor transplants here, however, were from parent to child, making up 97 of the 204 such operations conducted by Nucot between 1996 - when the procedure was first performed here - and 2019.

Liver transplants from living donors are becoming more important, as donations of the organs from the dead have not kept pace with growing demand, said Prof Shridhar.

Since 1990, there have been more than 500 liver transplants from both living and deceased donors in Singapore, with most of these procedures performed by Nucot.



Associate Professor Shridhar Iyer noted that smokers and those with fatty livers can also qualify as donors. PHOTO: NATIONAL UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL PHOTO: NATIONAL UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL

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While Prof Shridhar noted that living donor liver transplant is a complex operation with associated risks, the study - of which he was lead author - found no cases of donor deaths in the 204 procedures performed by Nucot, with less than 10 per cent of donors experiencing complications, which were largely minor.

Patients also performed well after such transplants. At five years after the procedure, the survival rate for adult patients who received livers from living donors was 83 per cent, while for children it was 89.2 per cent.

Prof Shridhar hopes the study will assure the public it is safe to be a living liver donor in Singapore.

Mr Sakthidalan Balathandautham, 29, was recognised as The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year 2021 for donating 23 per cent of his liver to one-year-old Rheya, following a social media appeal in 2020.

She was diagnosed with biliary atresia - a rare disease in infants where the bile ducts in the liver are inflamed, blocking bile flow to the gall bladder. It eventually leads to liver failure.

Despite surgery to improve the bile flow, her condition did not improve and her parents were told she would need a liver transplant.

Mr Sakthidalan, a senior sales executive said that while he has had to cut down on oily and carbohydrate-heavy food since the procedure, he has not suffered any complications.

Now two years old, Rheya is doing well, added Mr Sakthidalan, noting he regularly checks in with her parents to see how she is doing.

People who wish to donate their livers or other organs, such as kidneys or pancreas, should consult their doctors to check on their suitability, and should do so only when they feel confident about it and are able to spare the time for the procedure and recovery, said Mr Sakthidalan, who is single.

"These kinds of things require a lot of commitment from the donor, and you have to be really healthy," he added.

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