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“At precisely 5:52am on Sunday December 3rd, 1967, a 24-year-old heart starts beating in a 54-year-old chest, while an old, sick heart lies discarded, dead for all time” read the headlines. It’s worth retelling this inspirational story.

The Surgeon

Christiaan Barnard, a tall, handsome South African surgeon, performed the world famous operation. He had an impressive record in surgery, having performed Africa’s first human kidney transplant and first open heart operation.

He was living during a time of transplant frenzy: the world’s first kidney transplant having taken place in 1950; the first lung transplant in 1963 (the Soviet scientist Vladimir Demikhov was even attempting dog head transplants…).

Barnard took a pragmatic view of transplant, saying, “It is infinitely better to transplant a heart than to bury it to be devoured by worms”.

The Recipient

Heart transplantation is a last resort, when all other attempts to reinvigorate the failing heart have been attempted. The recipient of the first heart transplant Louis Washkansky was indeed desperate, heart failure having rendered him “a bloated and breathless wreck of a man, with days to live”.

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Barnard likened the plight of the heart transplant patient to that of a man being chased by a lion into a river filled

with crocodiles: the operation was as risky as swimming in crocodile-infested waters, but you would do it if faced with otherwise certain death (being eaten by a lion – or death from severe heart failure).

Today, those waiting to receive a heart [5] face the dilemma of needing to be sick enough to need a new heart (desperate enough to enter the river), yet well enough to undergo the operation (strong enough to swim). Washkansky himself, having taken the risk, survived only 18 days after the operation.

Thankfully, modern heart transplants are a lot safer, with average survival time being 13 years. In 2012, former vice president Dick Cheney [6] received a new heart at the age of 71, and daily relishes this 'gift of life'.

The Donor

"Where there's death, there's hope" – at least in the world of transplantation, for the surgery depends on another's tragedy. For Louis Washkansky, the donor was Denise Darvall, a bank worker knocked down by a car as she left a bakery. Her mother was also killed; her father a hero consenting to Denise's donation in his moment of double tragedy.

"Where there's death, there's hope"

The Forgotten Heroes

It's true that 'the winner takes it all' and that 'first never follows [7]', and Barnard is rightly remembered as a hero. Other surgeons [8] in the United States nearly beat him, however, and were instrumental in Barnard's learning and in refining the surgery.

Other real heroes were the tiny babies, born without a brain, and gifted as potential donors by their brave parents, in early failed transplants. Such legacies have been a source of moral debate [9]; baby Teddy Houlston [10] inspired the nation.

The final word belongs to the wife of Clive Haupt (Barnard's second donor) who said, "I am glad that my husband's coloured heart could save the life of a white man. I am also glad because it has changed the whole idea of apartheid. Now everyone can see that all of us – white, black or brown – have the same heart".

Did ever history record such an inspirational chapter?

MEDICAL JOURNALISTS' ASSOCIATION

Source URL:https://helencowan.co.uk/worlds-first-human-heart-transplant

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