Outreach program helps patients far afield

Hitting the Road for Transplant Candidates

By Todd Neff

A nephrologist, a transplant surgeon, two transplant coordinators, a social worker and an outreach coordinator hit the road.

This may or may not be the recipe for a summer-hit buddy movie, but it most certainly is good for patients with kidney failure living in the far corners of Colorado.

Once a month since February, this team of six has spent a day together many miles from the seventh-floor of the Anschutz Outpatient Pavilion, where they typically see patients. It’s part of a new initiative known as the Kidney/Pancreas Pre-transplant Evaluation Outreach Program.

Even abbreviated to KPPTEOP, it’s not the stuff of Hollywood posters. But the effort could be a boon to kidney-transplant referrals to University of Colorado Hospital. The new outreach program yields up to eight additional pre-transplant assessments per month, a 20 percent increase over the current Transplant Center total, said Marge Frueh, RN, MS, who directs the hospital’s Transplant Center. More importantly, it helps patients for whom the prospect of long-distance travel to Aurora is a deterrent to being assessed for the possibility of a transplant.

“We’re so used to people just being in Denver that we think the rest of the state can just come here for a kidney evaluation,” Frueh said. “But people on dialysis, or who have difficulty traveling around the state, this isn’t so easy for them.”

Get it rolling. Work on doing something about that began about a year ago, when referring providers started asking University of Colorado School of Medicine nephrologist Alexander Wiseman, MD, whether a UCH kidney-transplant outreach clinic might be in the cards.

Wiseman was familiar with such programs.

“There is a huge national understanding that access to transplant is very spotty, especially in geographic areas that are socioeconomically less well-off,” he said. The University of California, San Francisco, where he did his medical residency, has a successful pre-transplant outreach program, he added.

He talked it over with Frueh, who enlisted University Physicians, Inc. (UPI), the business arm of the CU School of Medicine, for a market analysis. It showed the Transplant Center to be either losing market share or at risk of it in different areas of the state, she said.

If patients couldn’t come to the transplant team, the transplant team would go to the patients. But there were plenty of questions to answer. What cities and towns would they visit? Where would
they start the clinics? How would they manage patient information flow? How would they ensure compliance with such things as the Stark Law, which prevents physicians from making certain referrals to institutions with which they have a financial relationship?

Details, details. The market analysis identified Grand Junction, Loveland, Pueblo, and Colorado Springs as good places to start, especially because University of Colorado Health partners north (Poudre Valley Hospital and Medical Center of the Rockies) and south (Memorial Hospital) have no transplant programs. Wiseman and others inquired with referring nephrologists about the possibility of lending the team a few clinic rooms on occasion.

The outreach program being a UPI/School of Medicine collaboration, Frueh and company needed a memorandum of understanding between those entities and UCH before they could send hospital staff such as transplant coordinators and social workers to distant clinics. The electronic medical record had to be sorted out: UCHealth Chief Information Officer Steve Hess and Suzanne Sullivan, the hospital’s vice president of Ambulatory Services, worked out a contract with UPI leadership that lets the team use Epic offsite. In part because of the extra effort involved with the outreach program, Frueh hired Stephanie Insinna as Transplant Program outreach coordinator in January.

The June 5 clinic scheduled for Pueblo will be the outreach program’s fifth since kicking off in Colorado Springs on Feb. 13. Wiseman, Insinna and clinical social worker Laurie Leder, LCSW, have been constants on these outings, which involve up to eight patients undergoing three-hour evaluations. A rotating cast of transplant coordinators, social workers and surgeons (Michael Zimmerman, Igal Kam and Thomas Bak have gone on different occasions) has joined them.

So far, so good. From the patient’s perspective, the outreach clinic looks like a typical clinic visit. The registered-nurse transplant coordinators take vital signs and perform basic screenings; there are consultations with nephrologist Wiseman and then with a transplant surgeon; a transplant coordinator educates patients on the transplant process; and the social worker performs a psychosocial evaluation. The pancreas comes into play because kidney-failure patients with type 1 diabetes can be candidates for both kidney and pancreas transplants.

Referring physicians and patients are already fans, Wiseman says.

“Patients have been incredibly appreciative, and providers are asking for more,” he said.

Frueh describes the outreach program as a one-year pilot. Costs — mostly provider and professional time — are being covered by UCH and the School of Medicine for now. Should the program expand, she’ll need to do some hiring, she said. Whether or not it continues will depend on whether the process yields transplant patients, she said. While the vagaries of patient health and organ availability will in part dictate the final numbers, she is optimistic.

“Only occasionally does something come along that gets you excited as a director,” she said. “This got me excited. This is something good for patients, good for the community, and good for the program at our hospital.”