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The gift of life, given online

Orangevale father helps fund ad campaign for Internet organ donor registration service

By Lakiesha McGhee -- Bee Staff Writer

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Justin Cooper would wake up at 6 a.m. each day to connect tubes from a kidney dialysis machine to his arm. For three hours, the machine would act as Cooper's artificial kidney, pumping waste from his body and usually leaving him weak, tired and aching with pain.

"Some days were better than others," Cooper said as he recalled the medical procedure that consumed his life for more than three years.

The 24-year-old Orangevale man was among about 18,500 people in California on a waiting list for lifesaving organs, of whom more than 13,500 are waiting for kidneys. Cooper became one of the lucky ones three months ago when he received a kidney from a living donor.

His father, Bruce Cooper, now hopes others will get a chance at better health from an advertising campaign he helped fund to raise awareness of a new online registry for organ and tissue donors in California.

Bruce Cooper, owner of Village RV in Roseville, said he contacted a business associate to raise more than \$100,000 in billboard and transit ad space to promote [donatelifecalifornia.org](#) for the next 12 months.

The Web site - which was launched in April - joins California with 39 other states that provide residents an opportunity to sign up as organ and tissue donors online. Before the Web site's launch, there was no record of donors in the state, said Tracy Bryan, president of the nonprofit Donate Life California, which administers the organ and tissue registry. "It seems like Californians were ready for this to happen. We attracted more sign-ups in the first two months of launching the site than we expected in the first two years."

The old system for identifying organ and tissue donors in California involved a signed donor card kept in the person's wallet and a pink driver's license sticker. Typically, only family members would know about the person's decision to be an organ and tissue donor, Bryan said.

Now, each registrant's donation decision can be stored for free in a secure database. Authorized organ and tissue recovery personnel can match that information to transplants, based on medical criteria. Those who are sickest and have been on the list the longest receive priority.

Within four months, 100,000 Californians registered online to be organ and tissue donors, which is an unprecedented achievement in the United States, according to a news release from Donate Life California. However, other efforts are under way to reach 36 million potential donors in California, particularly Latinos, who represent the greatest number of candidates in the state - 4,500 - waiting for a kidney transplant, Bryan said.

Bryan supports Sen. Jackie Speier's bill, SB 689, which would require the state Department of Motor Vehicles to collect organ and tissue donor information on its applications and renewals for driver's licenses and identification cards. If the bill passes, the program would go into effect in July 2006, according to the news release. A registry system including the DMV would help reach residents without access to the Internet, Bryan said.

Bruce Cooper said he couldn't stand by and wait as his son's health deteriorated from chronic nephritis, a disorder resulting in inflammation and gradual, progressive destruction of the internal kidney structures. He said he also was concerned that the daily kidney dialysis was keeping his son from activities that most people his age do, such as traveling.

"My frustration with my inability to control the outcome is what got me involved," Cooper said about his efforts to help promote donatelifecalifornia.org.

Cooper earlier this year approached a business associate of ClearChannel Outdoor, a media company that provides advertising space for outdoor displays. He said he explained the challenge faced by his son and others, and the company - which was already interested in advocating for organ and tissue donation - reacted immediately.

Jim Lyons, ClearChannel Outdoor president and general manager, donated \$100,000 in billboard and transit ad space in Northern California to be displayed over the next 12 months. The displays include two 14-by-48-foot billboards, 100 12-by-24-foot billboards and 15 transit shelter displays - with production of the ads paid for by Bruce Cooper.

ClearChannel last month placed transit shelter ads at locations in Sacramento. Two of the larger billboards were installed in July, said Troy Mulert of ClearChannel Outdoor. One is on Interstate 680 west of Industrial Way in Benicia, catching the attention of westbound traffic heading to the Bay Area from Sacramento. The other is on Highway 101 and reaches traffic bound for San Francisco International Airport.

Justin Cooper, who is now in good health and recently returned from a camping trip, said he hopes the billboards will help end the agonizing wait for others still seeking an organ or tissue donation. He said he was relieved when he received a phone call from a family friend telling him that she was a match to donate one of her kidneys to him. The operation occurred June 14.

"That was a pretty nice call, to say the least," Cooper said.

Truth about organ donations

Many misconceptions continue to swirl around the act of donating human organs. Here are some key facts:

- Becoming a donor will not affect the quality of your medical care.
- Organ and tissue donation takes place after all efforts to save your life have been exhausted and two doctors have declared you legally brain dead.
- The donor family pays none of the costs associated with a donation.
- Donating an organ at time of death does not preclude having an open-casket funeral.
- Those in need of a transplant are eligible to receive one. Celebrity status and wealth do not enter into the equation.

- Organs are allocated according to medical criteria (urgency of medical need, blood and tissue type, height and weight).
- All major religions support or permit donation and consider it an act of charity.

Source: Golden State Donor Services

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