

COVID patient didn't recognize body after double transplant

July 31 2020

A Chicago woman who last month became the nation's first COVID-19 patient to undergo a double lung transplant said Thursday that she woke up days later, unaware about the surgery and unable to "recognize my body."

Mayra Ramirez said that before she fell ill she was an independent, active person who moved from North Carolina to Chicago in 2014 to work as a paralegal. She said she had an autoimmune condition, but was otherwise healthy. She had gone on a three-mile run shortly before becoming ill and heading for the hospital.

"I was told to hurry up (and) change," she said. "I was asked who would be making my medical decisions for me. That's when I told them it would be my mother and eldest sister who all live in North Carolina. I only had a couple minutes to contact them to let them know what was going on before I was intubated."

Ramirez, 28, spoke to the media on Thursday alongside Brian Kuhns, 62, of Lake Zurich, Illinois, who followed her as the second U.S. coronavirus patient to undergo a double [transplant](#).

Ramirez underwent the [lung transplant](#) on June 5 at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago. She didn't wake up until mid-June.

"I looked at myself and couldn't recognize my body," she said. "I didn't have the cognitive ability to process what was going on. All I knew was

that I wanted water."

Dr. Ankit Bharat, chief of thoracic surgery and surgical director of the Northwestern Medicine Lung Transplant Program, said Ramirez, who was on a ventilator, fought for her life for six weeks, with the virus completely destroying her lungs. Doctors would call Nohemi Romero, her mother in North Carolina, with updates.

Ramirez, sitting next to her mother during a news conference at the hospital, said her family made the trip to Chicago with the intention of saying goodbye.

"Luckily, once they arrived, my mother and my two sisters, the medical team was able to stabilize me," Ramirez said. "They were explained the option of lung transplantation and my mother agreed to it. And then within 48 hours, I received the 10-hour lung transplant."

Bharat is calling Ramirez's surgery a "milestone" in care for patients with severe COVID-19.

"Lung transplant isn't for every patient with COVID-19, but it does offer some of the critically ill patients another option for survival," Bharat said. "Mayra and Brian are living proof of that."

Thoracic surgeon Dr. Rafael Garza Castillon said Northwestern is now considering performing the procedure on other patients who've eliminated the virus and have no other significant organ failure.

"We are all learning together and sharing best practices, and now [lung](#) transplant is part of COVID-19 care," Bharat said.

Ramirez who is now at home, said she's feeling much better, though she's still working to rebuild her strength and endurance. She said she

knows there's a family grieving their loved one.

"It wasn't until weeks later that I had the ability to, you know, think to myself there's a family out there that's grieving their loved one," Ramirez said. "I have that person's lungs and how lucky I was to have received it."

Kuhns said he thought the virus was a hoax until he contracted it.

"This disease is not a joke," he said. "It hit me like a lead slammer on my head. I was perfectly healthy. This thing took me down hard."

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Citation: COVID patient didn't recognize body after double transplant (2020, July 31) retrieved 24 June 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-07-covid-patient-didnt-body-transplant.html>

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