

Hospital has put her kidney transplant on hold; She blames the unvaccinated

September 10 2021, by Christopher O'donnell



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Carol Johnson has battled Type 1 diabetes since she was 12.

It meant an unforgiving regime of injections and medication. For 12

years, an insulin pump has never been far from her side.

Diabetes has taken a toll on other parts of her body. She needed open-heart and [eye surgery](#). Three years ago, her [kidney function](#) deteriorated to the point where she qualified for Tampa General Hospital's donor list. In May, she was placed on regular dialysis, a sign of impending kidney failure.

So Johnson, 67, was thrilled in early August when her brother was approved as a donor.

That should have meant surgery within weeks, she said. But then she learned her operation was indefinitely on hold because the hospital had suspended elective surgeries due to a surge of COVID-19 patients.

Hope turned to frustration and fear. The longer she is on dialysis, the less the chance of success for her surgery. She is angry about all the people who ignored calls for them to get the vaccine, which is provided for free.

"They take up a hospital bed, and the hospital can't turn them away," she said. "I don't wish them any ill will, of course, but when you make stupid mistakes, you should take responsibility."

Hundreds of patients have been left waiting for surgeries as Tampa Bay hospitals diverted doctors, nurses, ventilators and beds to treat a record level of COVID patients.

AdventHealth has paused non-emergency surgeries at seven of its Tampa Bay Region hospitals. BayCare paused elective surgeries at hospitals in Hillsborough, Pinellas, Polk and Pasco counties. HCA Healthcare has also suspended some procedures.

"COVID is affecting the whole of the health care system," said BayCare

chief medical officer Dr. Nishant Anand. "Every service has been stressed because of the increasing demands on health care needs."

Anand said BayCare is still performing emergency surgeries, such as those for internal bleeding from a vehicle accident or a burst appendix. Urgent surgeries are still being scheduled, such as operations to remove tumors, which cannot be left for weeks.

But procedures such as spine or hip operations scheduled weeks in advance have been put on hold. There also is a delay on screenings, such as colonoscopies

"It's something that can wait a couple of weeks, but you can't wait too long," Anand said. "What happens if you miss a cancer?"

Patients who need rotator-cuff or knee surgery or diagnostic procedures such as a heart catheterization may also have to wait. In some cases, patients will be in pain longer, a situation Anand described as "gut wrenching."

"It's a burden that has been placed, unfortunately, on the patients," he said.

Local hospitals did not provide numbers of how many procedures they have delayed. With the hold on electives in effect at some hospitals for more than a month, the number of affected patients likely runs into the thousands.

AdventHealth Tampa postponed and rescheduled more than 2,000 surgeries in March and April of 2020 after Gov. Ron DeSantis signed an executive order limiting non-threatening medical procedures to conserve medical supplies. Tampa General, which performs about 60,000 surgeries and procedures annually, delayed thousands of procedures

during the roughly six weeks the order was in effect.

Delaying needed surgeries can result in worse outcomes and higher mortality for patients across a spectrum of diseases, according to a study in the *Annals of Surgery*.

Hospitals also are hit financially. Across the United States, hospitals are estimated to have lost about \$22 billion from surgeries canceled between March and May 2020. The resulting backlog could take months or more to clear.

BayCare has scheduled some non-emergency procedures at outpatient surgery centers for procedures that allow a patient to return home the same day. Officials at BayFront Health St. Petersburg said they are still performing elective surgeries.

Johnson, the woman waiting for a [kidney transplant](#), lived in Pinellas Park when she was placed on the donor list. She has since moved to South Carolina, but was prepared to travel to Tampa for the [surgery](#).

She doesn't understand why her case is not considered an emergency.

"The longer we wait, the sicker we get," she said.

Tampa General said it cannot comment on her case due to medical privacy laws, but said in a statement that the hospital is performing live-donor transplant procedures on "medically emergent cases, evaluating each on a case-by-case basis ..."

The hospital, ranked the sixth busiest transplant [hospital](#) by volume of operations, typically performs five to seven live-donor transplants per month.

"TGH leadership continues to monitor the COVID surge situation closely and will amend our procedural schedule as needed to ensure the safety of our patients, team members and physicians," said spokesperson Phil Buck in an email.

Johnson, who works as an attorney in South Carolina, said she is trying to get approved for a transplant at Emory University Hospital in Atlanta. She is a single parent for a son, 31, who is on the autism spectrum. He wanted to be her donor. He's not ready to let her go, she said.

"I am more frightened about the effect my death could have on him than anything else," she said. "Fortunately, we have a good support system in place with my family members. Still, I am his person."

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Citation: Hospital has put her kidney transplant on hold; She blames the unvaccinated (2021, September 10) retrieved 27 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-09-hospital-kidney-transplant-blames-unvaccinated.html>

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