

Houston hospital says doctor's changes to a database made patients ineligible for liver transplants

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Buildings associated with Memorial Hermann Hospital and medical complex are visible Friday, April 12, 2024 in the Medical Center district of Houston. Memorial Hermann-Texas Medical Center has halted its liver transplant and kidney transplant programs. The Houston Chronicle reported Thursday that the hospital discovered a doctor manipulated records for liver transplant candidates. Credit: Kirk Sides/Houston Chronicle via AP

A Houston hospital has halted its liver and kidney transplant programs after it says a doctor manipulated a database for liver transplant patients, making them ineligible to receive a new organ.

Memorial Hermann-Texas Medical Center said in a statement Friday that their ongoing investigation found that a doctor had made "inappropriate changes" in a database for people awaiting liver transplants. Memorial Hermann's statement didn't name the doctor, but the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, or UTHealth Houston, issued a statement defending Dr. Steve Bynon, calling him "an exceptionally talented and caring physician" with survival rates that are "among the best in the nation."

Bynon is an employee of UTHealth Houston who is contracted to Memorial Hermann. UTHealth said its faculty and staff, including Bynon, are assisting with the inquiry into Memorial Hermann's liver transplant program and are "committed to addressing and resolving any findings identified by this process."

Memorial Hermann said a doctor made changes to the donor acceptance criteria, which includes factors like the age and weight of the deceased donors. The hospital said the inappropriate changes were only made to the liver transplant program, but since there is shared leadership over both the liver and kidney transplant programs, they inactivated both.

Shutting down the transplant programs during the investigation is prudent with an "allegation of this magnitude," said Karen Maschke, a research scholar at the Hastings Center, a medical ethics think tank. "They know full well that when they put a program on hold, it's going to have a really serious impact on patients. So I think they probably don't make that decision lightly."

Such allegations of manipulating a transplant waiting list can undermine the public's trust in the organ allocation system, Maschke said.

Without fairness, transparency and accountability in a transplant program "you lose, the trust of patients, but also donors," Maschke said, "because, donors won't want to provide organs if they think that the institution is not going to manage the allocation system fairly."

Memorial Hermann said in a statement Thursday to [The New York Times](#) that a doctor in the liver transplant program admitted to changing patient records. The newspaper identified the doctor as Bynon.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services said in a statement that they were "working across the department to address this matter." The Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network, or OPTN, said it "cannot comment on any potential or ongoing review of a member organization."

The death rate for people waiting for a liver transplant at Memorial Hermann was higher than expected in recent years, according to publicly available data from the Scientific Registry of Transplant Recipients, which evaluates U.S. organ transplant programs.

Data from OPTN shows that four patients died or became too ill for a transplant in 2021, 11 in 2022, 14 in 2023, and so far this year, that number was at five.

The UTHealth statement said that Bynon treated "patients with higher-than-average acuity and disease complexity."

Memorial Hermann said they've been working with patients who were on the lists to ensure they get the care they need, including being transitioned to another transplant program if necessary. Memorial

Hermann also said it was working with UTHealth Houston to make changes so they can reactivate the program under different leadership.

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