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Congressmen push for kidney funding

By Pamela Berry
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Betty Watson of Jackson says she has been on dialysis for 12 years because of uncontrolled high blood pressure.

To learn more, visit
www.kidney.org/atoz/atozItem.cfm?atozItem.cfm?id=35

It took three episodes of remaining still while the room seemed to swirl around him before Ivan Wilson admitted he might be ill.

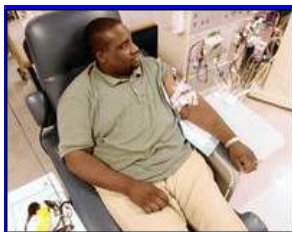
The last time, Wilson was leaving his parents' home when the swirling and nausea became so intense he had to sit in his truck for two

hours before he could move.

"That's what sent me to the doctor," said Wilson, 31, of Jackson. "I didn't think I was dying, but it scared me."

The diagnosis - vertigo brought on by kidney failure.

And although he had neither high blood pressure or diabetes - two of the most common causes of kidney failure - Wilson still became one of the thousands of Mississippians requiring dialysis to stay alive.



Joe Ellis/The Clarion-Ledger

Ivan Wilson of Jackson is one of a growing population of Mississippians needing treatments to cleanse impurities from his blood, a function his failing kidneys cannot provide. He undergoes dialysis treatments three times a week and hopes to someday receive a kidney transplant.

In Mississippi, a state excessively burdened by high blood pressure and diabetes, one in nine residents suffer from kidney disease.

In 2004, 4,886 Mississippians were diagnosed with kidney failure, up more than 10 percent since 2001. Nationally, an estimated 400,000 Americans have the potentially fatal illness. The disease also mainly affects racial and ethnic minorities, particularly African Americans, American Indians and Hispanics, according to Kidney Care Partners, a national alliance of provider and patient groups including the National Kidney Foundation.

Because of an aging population and increasing levels of obesity and diabetes, health experts predict the number of dialysis patients will dramatically increase - possibly triple - in the next 25 years.

But kidney-care advocates say the federal funding allocated to treat the increasing patient pool has remained flat. The same dollar spent for dialysis treatment in 1983 when the federal kidney program was created won't go nearly as far today, they said.

Rhonda Zuga, area manager of Fresenius Medical Care, a dialysis center in Jackson, said failing to provide extra funding for things such as

improvements in dialysis technology and competitive salaries for specialized nurses eventually will trickle down to dialysis patients who mainly rely on Medicare to pay the bulk of their dialysis costs. About 93 percent of patients with end-stage renal disease are Medicare eligible.

"The dollars are not going as far as they used to," Zuga said.

A bill pending before Congress could help address that. The Kidney Care Quality and Improvement Act of 2005 would raise Medicare funding for treating end stage renal disease or kidney failure by 1.6 percent. It also would allow the funding to be reviewed on an annual basis by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid to consider any changes in inflation, technological improvements and increased needs for qualified nurses and staff, similar to provisions for other health-care programs. The bill has already passed the Senate and kidney-care advocates are pushing for a House passage this year.

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Second District Rep. Bennie Thompson, a Democrat, along with fellow Mississippi congressmen Chip Pickering of the 3rd District and Roger Wicker of the 1st District and Sen. Thad Cochran, all Republicans, already publicly are supporting the legislation, according to the Kidney Care Website.

Thompson, of Bolton, said it made sense to support a bill that would benefit many of those in his district. "My district has probably as many dialysis patients as any other in the state," he said. "Many of the illnesses associated with kidney illnesses happen with the majority of the population in my district and, to the extent that we can make the service and care available to the citizens, I want to do that."

If an increase in funding is needed to continue caring for dialysis patients, Thompson said he'll continue to support the increase.

Pickering, of Flora, said he, too, thinks the bill is important for Mississippians but has concerns about its passage this year. "It is going to be tough, given the current budget climate," Pickering said. "We have broad bipartisan support. It may not pass this year and in this Congress, but I believe that we're laying the ground work to eventually give the predictable resources, reform and care as well as provide better education and prevention. For Mississippi it's critical since we do lead the nation in this disease, and the treatments are so vital to sustain not only the quality of life, but life itself."

Wilson, whose kidney failure likely resulted from scarred liver cells following a childhood infection, said kidney dialysis has sustained his life since May 6, 1999. And although he hopes to one day free himself from three-times-a-week dialysis treatments by getting a kidney transplant, he's grateful for the medical technology that allows him to lead a normal life. Four other close relatives, including his father, two uncles and his maternal grandmother, also suffer from kidney failure, he said.

"The first time I came in for treatment, I remember there were all these people that looked literally like they were a step away from death's door," said Wilson. "The first eight people I saw had missing limbs or were much older. That really messed me up, and I thought ... I just can't see myself being here and just going down. Needless to say, after my first treatment, I realized that it wasn't that bad."

Betty Watson said kidney dialysis is something she'll have to deal with for the rest of her life.

"I have a calcium build-up in my body, so I can't get a kidney (transplant)," said Watson, a 59-year-old retired schoolteacher. "It's like when people ask me what it's like. I tell them it's not hard ... there are days when you feel better than others, but that's life. Everyday isn't a good day for the well person."

Watson has undergone dialysis for the past 12 years after uncontrolled high blood pressure caused her kidneys to fail. "I'm grateful for the person who invented the dialysis machine," she said of the treatment that cleans her blood by pumping it from her body, removing the impurities that healthy kidneys would remove, then pumping the blood back into her body in a span of 3 1/2 hours. "You really don't know how sick you are until after your blood is cleaned," she said.

Watson said she always urges friends and relatives to take better care of themselves and take measures to prevent chronic illnesses like kidney failure. She's learned to accept her fate, she said, by having a positive attitude and through the support of good friends.

"When there are new patients I meet, I tell them don't feel sad," Watson said. "Accept this is a part of your life. This is what you have to do."

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