

Doing battle with a killer

By Erin Madison
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Dialysis buys more time for patients with kidney disease

Before Joe Marlow was diagnosed with polycystic kidney disease, he and his wife, Maggie, were already working to save their daughter from the disease. Now Marlow receives dialysis treatment at Good Samaritan Hospital.

The Marlows' daughter was diagnosed with the disease in 1964 when she was 1, before anybody had even really heard of polycystic kidney disease, Maggie Marlow said.

Doctors said she wouldn't live very long, but she made it to the age of 30.

Even though polycystic kidney disease affects more than 600,000 Americans and is the most common genetic, life threatening disease, according to the Polycystic Kidney Disease Foundation, very few people know about it.

The Marlows talked Friday at Good Samaritan Regional Medical Center about the disease that has taken three of their four children. They were doing their part to help raise public awareness about polycystic kidney disease and other kidney diseases for End-Stage-Renal-Disease Awareness week.

End stage renal disease, or kidney failure, is the stage of kidney disease that requires dialysis therapy or a kidney transplant to keep a patient alive.

In 2001, there were almost half a million patients in the United States with end-stage renal disease, according to the American Nephrology Nurses' Association. That number is expected to double by 2010 and increase to more than 2 million over the next 25 years, said Jackie Chandler, manager of Samaritan Dialysis Services.

"Kidney disease is an epidemic now," said Mohammed Mohammed, a nephrologist, or kidney doctor, at Good Samaritan.

Marlow, who is now 70, was first told his kidneys were failing 17 years ago. He's been on dialysis for the past six years. He comes to Good Samaritan three times a week for the 3- to 4-hour long treatment.

He's had both his kidneys, which were the size of footballs, removed, Mohammed said. A kidney should be about the size of someone's fist.

Dialysis has greatly limited his ability to travel and what he can eat and drink, Marlow said. He can only drink about 6 to 7 pounds of water in between his dialysis treatments. A gallon of water weighs more than 8 pounds.

With the summer heat and his limits on hydration, Marlow stays indoors.

While kidney conditions like the one Joe Marlow has can result in end stage renal disease, the leading cause of it is diabetes, accounting for 42 percent of new cases, Chandler said. The rising rate of obesity, which can lead to diabetes and therefore kidney disease, is largely to blame for the increased number of patients needing dialysis. It's estimated that 10 to 21 percent of all people with diabetes have kidney disease.



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Jody Lane visits Samaritan Dialysis Services three times a week for treatment. Many patients will sleep or watch television during the four hour treatment.

"The average life span of a diabetic after dialysis is five years," Mohammed said.

Dialysis is not ideal, in fact it's still very primitive, he said. It's only as effective as a kidney operating at 15 to 20 percent. The kidney removes toxins and excess fluid from blood, as well as controlling pH and adding hormones,

"Our kidney is one of the most wonderful organs," Mohammed said. "Dialysis is just something to buy some time."

Kidney function can be measured through a simple blood test, she said, but most doctors don't do them on a regular basis.

People generally know what a healthy weight, blood pressure or cholesterol level is, but few people know what their kidney numbers are or should be, she said. It's also important for people to ask their doctors.

A major problem is that many patients find out that their kidneys are beginning to fail when it's already too late to do anything about it, Chandler said.