

Dialysis clinics, doctors work to prevent kidney failure by raising awareness

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With more than 2,453 candidates waiting for kidney transplants in Alabama, local doctors and dialysis clinics are making it their mission to inform patients of risk factors leading to end-stage renal failure.

And they're even taking their battle to Congress.

As part of Kidney Awareness Week Aug. 8-12, Landmark Dialysis in Talladega printed fliers warning patients of risks associated with kidney disease such as diabetes and hypertension, and informed them of the Kidney Care Quality and Improvement Act of 2005.

"Between the two (dialysis) units in Talladega, there's almost 100 patients," said Bonnie Miller, clinic director at Landmark Dialysis. "And that's just in this city."

The recently introduced act calls for better care among patients with kidney disease through improvements in Medicare and enhanced education programs, which would prevent numbers in Talladega County from growing any more.

Although the act currently sits in a Senate committee awaiting approval, that's not stopping local doctors from offering warnings to at-risk patients.

"The main thing we need is to get the message across to people at risk for kidney failure, those with diabetes, hypertension, black people and those with a family history," said Ghayas Habash, a Sylacauga-based nephrologist. "... If we address these people aggressively, we can prevent a lot of kidney failure."

Talladega County, which has some of the state's highest ratings of diabetes and hypertension, is especially in need of patient education, Habash said.

"A lot of signs (relating to kidney failure) can be hidden and go on in the patients literally without symptoms," he said. "Health promotions and just making people aware a little bit would really do the job."

While Habash and other local doctors are working to inform people on the home front, Gov. Bob Riley and local legislators in Washington are doing their best to make the battle for better care of patients with end-stage renal failure known on a national level.

Riley announced Tuesday that a ban on dialysis treatment centers in rural communities had been lifted following a vote from the State Committee of Public Health.

The regulation, which dates back to 1975, required all dialysis clinics be located within 10 miles of a hospital, putting a burden on patients who require treatment three days a week in rural areas such as the Black Belt, a release from Riley's office states.

"Since the beginning, I've said this commission exists not to study problems but to take action to solve problems," Riley said in a press release Tuesday. "This common sense change can help solve a very real problem for so many of our fellow Alabamians. It not only gives them greater access to life-saving treatment, it also reduces a tremendous strain on ambulance services in communities."

Meanwhile, Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Saks, is also striving for changes to raise awareness about kidney disease in Washington.

As a co-sponsor of the Kidney Care Quality Improvement Act, Rogers said, "It is critical Congress does everything it can to help combat this lethal disease, and supports efforts to get better treatments for those most in need."

While national and local legislators are battling for better patient care and education among those at risk for renal failure, Habash said simple check-ups can help prevent many instances of kidney disease.

Because kidneys can fail 50 to 60 percent with no symptoms, he said, patients that are at risk should have yearly doctor visits and maintain a healthy diet, low blood pressure and may take medicine to prevent failure.

"A lot of patients I see, they're already too late," Habash said. "Anytime they get sent to us before end-stage renal failure, we can help. ... Proper health care can prolong the time it takes to reach complete kidney failure up to 10 years in a kidney destined to fail in two years."

For more information on risk factors for kidney failure and prevention, visit www.kidney.org, or consult your doctor.