

Kidney swop transplant gives woman new lease of life

Process allows medically incompatible couple to 'exchange' kidneys with another such pair

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Ms Serene Mai, a 37-year-old who suffered from kidney failure, has received a new lease of life through an arrangement called a kidney swop.

Her husband, 39-year-old administrator Kevin Wee, wanted to donate his kidney to her, but their blood groups are incompatible for a transplant – his is B+ and hers is A.

While it is possible for her to undergo a transplant using his kidney, the procedure would be more risky and more costly compared with a transplant from someone of a compatible blood group.

So Mr Wee donated his kidney to an anonymous recipient, and that

person's loved one, who is medically compatible with Ms Mai, gave his or her kidney to her late last year.

The procedure is known as a paired kidney exchange transplant, where a pair of living donor and recipient who are medically incompatible, such as having incompatible blood groups or tissue types, "exchange" their kidney with another such pair. This arrangement lets recipients receive a kidney from a donor they are medically compatible with.

While the Wees do not know the identity of the pair involved in their kidney swop, Ms Mai said: "They gave not just one person but two persons a new lease of life."

Kidney swops are rare in Singapore. Including Ms Mai and her husband, there have been only five paired kidney exchange transplants benefiting 10 patients here



WORTHWHILE EXCHANGE

Before her transplant, Serene was so tired and angsty. I feel that giving my kidney is worth it. I got my wife back.



MR KEVIN WEE

VERY BIG SACRIFICE

It's giving an organ, a part of yourself. It's a very big sacrifice.



MSSERENE MAI

since the first case in 2015, Professor Tan Chee Kiat, director of the National Organ Transplant Unit at the Health Ministry, told The Straits Times.

These transplants are allowed here since 2009, he said, adding that the identities of both pairs of donors and recipients are kept anonymous to protect their privacy and medical confidentiality.

The National Organ Transplant Unit coordinates the paired kidney exchange transplants here, and it oversees the National Kidney Paired Exchange Registry.

As at June this year, there are five pairs on the registry waiting to be matched and the waiting time for a paired exchange transplant is about four to five months. In comparison, the average wait for a kidney from a dead donor is more than eight years, said Prof Tan.

In June, ST reported that the

number of kidney transplants has fallen over the past two years and the waiting time for a donor kidney has grown longer.

For example, there were 33 kidney transplants involving dead donors in 2019; the number fell to 15 in 2020 and 24 last year.

Doctors cited the Covid-19 pandemic for the fall in numbers as staff were redeployed to help with pandemic operations and transplants were postponed, especially when the patients were deemed to be at high risk.

Ms Mai's health woes started at the age of nine when she was diagnosed with lupus. The autoimmune disease gradually caused her kidneys to fail and she was diagnosed with kidney failure in 2020.

She did not want to undergo dialysis for the rest of her life, which in-

Ms Serene Mai, who suffered from kidney failure, and her husband Kevin Wee. Because their blood types were incompatible, Mr Wee donated his kidney to an anonymous recipient, and that person's loved one, who is medically compatible with Ms Mai, gave his or her kidney to her late last year.

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GIN TAY

CRUCIAL 'LIFEBUOY' continued on B2