

Couple rallies donors to support liver donation

By ALLISON MARLOW
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The Bertram's nightmarish medical journey began with a scene that seemed cut straight out of a horror movie.

In the fall of 2016, Tony Bertram awoke at 2:30 a.m. to find his wife Cindy Bertram on the floor of their bathroom, vomiting. She was surrounded, he said, in a lake of blood.

Doctors said she was bleeding internally.

"There's no telling how long she has been bleeding inside. You don't see it until, bam, it happens," Tony said.

Cindy spent three weeks in the hospital and received 17 units of blood, enough to replace all the blood in her body. At first, a diagnosis was unclear. So was her prognosis to survive.

"The doctor looked at me and said, 'I don't know,'" Tony said.

When she finally returned home to Robertsdale, 24 hours later, the vomiting returned and she headed back to the hospital for another week.

Finally, after a battery of tests, poking and prodding, there was an answer. Cindy was suffering from Hepatitis C, a disease caused by a virus that infects the liver. Generally the disease is spread through blood to blood contact, such as through shared needles or blood transfusions.

Doctors believe Cindy may have been infected in 1972 when a bad car wreck sent her sailing through her car's windshield. She received multiple blood transfusions after the accident, one of which may have unknowingly been tainted with the virus.

Roughly 3.4 million people in the U.S. have Hepatitis C, and many of those do not know it. The disease is called the silent killer because there are few noticeable symptoms. Approximately 70 - 80 percent of people with acute Hepatitis C have no symptoms at all.

"We'd never even heard of it before," Tony said.

Doctors were able to put Cindy on medication to treat the virus, and rid it from her body. But the damage was done. The virus had ravaged her liver, causing the organ to fail.

The liver plays an enormous part in the

Want to donate?

WHAT: Help Hope Live - Community-based fundraising for people with unmet medical and related expenses due to cell and organ transplants or catastrophic injuries and illnesses.

HOW: Visit www.helpoholive.org to find out how you can donate or help in fundraising campaigns.

Symptoms

Hepatitis C can be a silent disease, meaning that people can have it but not have noticeable symptoms. Approximately 70 - 80 percent of people with acute hepatitis C do not have any symptoms. Some people, however, can have mild to severe symptoms soon after being infected.

As many people have no symptoms, they may not know that they have hepatitis C, and therefore don't seek treatment. Symptoms of chronic hep C may take years to develop. During this time, the infected person can spread the virus to others.

SYMPTOMS OF BOTH ACUTE AND CHRONIC HEPATITIS C MAY INCLUDE:

- Fever
- Fatigue (feeling tired even if you've had a normal amount of rest and activity)
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea (upset stomach)
- Vomiting
- Abdominal pain (pain in the gut)
- Dark urine
- Clay-colored stools
- Joint pain
- Jaundice (yellow color in the eyes or skin)

What is Hepatitis C?

About 3.4 million people are living with Hepatitis C in the United States. It is a disease caused by a virus that infects the liver and can lead to inflammation of the liver and cause the immune system to attack healthy liver cells.

body and serves over 500 different roles, including producing bile to break down and absorb fats, cholesterol and vitamins, help blood to clot, and filter the blood.

The unchecked Hepatitis C virus destroyed Cindy's liver over the years, causing cirrhosis. The conditioned caused scar tissue to gradually replace her healthy liver cells, causing her liver to stop functioning.

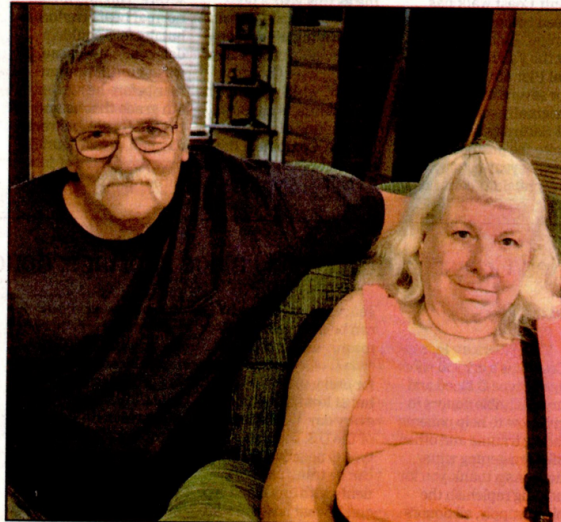
Once her liver stopped producing enzymes that other organs in her body depended on, they began to fail as well. In Cindy's case, the artery attached to her lungs stopped pumping and

she couldn't breathe. Doctors installed a pump that runs from a box she attaches to her belt, through her belly and into her heart. The medicines running from the pump do the job her liver has stopped performing.

She has good days and bad days. She is almost always tired. Her pump has already failed. Twice.

This week marks her one year anniversary of being placed on the donor list to receive a new liver.

Tony, a Marine Corps veteran, has made it his life's work to care for Cindy and teach others



SUBMITTED PHOTO

How it spreads

Hepatitis C is caused by a virus that spreads when blood from a person infected with the hepatitis C virus comes into contact with the blood of someone who is not infected. It does not spread through food or water, or by sitting on toilet seats. It cannot be transmitted by sharing knives, forks, or spoons; breastfeeding; hugging, kissing, or holding hands; or coughing or sneezing.

how to deal with the sudden and difficult change of life that comes with a Hepatitis C diagnosis.

"There are literally thousands of people hurting that need to know about this. I'm learning as I go and I pass what I learn to other people," he said.

Tony has created online accounts with Twitter and YouTube to post information and videos about the methods he uses to change Cindy's dressings and mix the daily medications that have taken up residence across their dining room table.

He cares for the couple's adult son who

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- You are a current or past user of shared needles
- You were treated for a blood clotting problem before 1987
- You received a blood transfusion or organ transplant before July 1992
- You are on long-term hemodialysis treatment
- You have abnormal liver tests or liver disease
- You work in health care or public safety and were exposed to blood through a needlestick or other sharp object injury
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- Have gotten tattoos or body piercings from an unlicensed facility or in an informal setting

LIVER

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suffers from Fragile X syndrome.

He worries about the cost of recovering from Cindy's eventual liver transplant. A single medication can cost up to \$1,500 a month. Cindy will most likely need three to four prescriptions to help her new liver function.

He has also become a cheerleader for the organization Help Hope Live which helps individuals suffering from traumatic illness raise money to

pay for their medical procedures. Tony said the couple was unable to host any fundraisers or a Go Fund Me page to help pay for Cindy's care because those funds would be counted as income, making them ineligible for Medicare.

Wherever Tony goes, he carries brochures and business cards he has made in an effort to convince people to donate, both their money, and their organs.

A healthy liver is the only human organ that can regenerate itself. While a living donor can give part of their liver, the operation is very risky. Therefore, Cindy is waiting on a liver from an organ donor. The wait for a liver is longer since the donated organ must match not just blood type but the donor and the recipient must be the same size. The size of their livers must match as well.

Until a match is found for Cindy, Tony continues his fight to keep Cindy alive and help those suffering from the disease as well.

"I'm a family man. I believe family comes first in everything," he said. "We've been married 45 years. My entire job is to take care of her. That's what I'm going to do."

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