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Description

In 1967, when the first heart transplants were performed, they were hailed as a dramatic medical breakthrough. Between 1968 and 1970, Dr. Michael DeBakey and his team performed 12 of them in Houston. But DeBakey and many other surgeons have stopped doing the procedure because they still don't yet know how to keep the body from rejecting a new heart indefinitely.

Keywords

Michael DeBakey, Heart Transplant, Heart, Transplants, Christiaan Barnard, Surgeon, Surgery, Operation, Risks, Failures, Organ, Rejection, Heart Disease, Blood, Circulation, Coronary Artery Disease, Houston, Texas, Norman Shumway, Stanford University, John Schroeder, Cardiology, Cardiologist, Carl Sheaffer, Patient, Quality of Life, Baylor College of Medicine

Citation

MLA
Michael DeBakey and Other Surgeons Question Worth of Heart Transplants

JOHN CHANCELLOR, anchor:
The excitement generated throughout the world when Doctor Christiaan Barnard of South Africa performed the world’s first heart transplant has died down since then. A good many transplants have been performed since. And now there’s a considerable difference of opinion whether they should be.

JOHN DANCY, reporting:
Four years ago, when the first American heart transplants were done in Houston and other places, they were hailed as a dramatic medical breakthrough. Between 1968 and 1970, Doctor Michael DeBakey and his team did twelve heart transplant operations. But DeBakey no longer does them; hasn’t performed one since January 1970. He and many other American surgeons are disillusioned with them. Most transplants have failed because the doctors still don’t yet know how to keep the body from rejecting the new heart indefinitely. In any case, Doctor DeBakey thinks new developments are making transplant unnecessary.

DR. MICHAEL DEBAKEY, Heart Surgeon: These developments have reduced the indications for replacing a heart because you can now do something before that particular heart disease with new developments in surgery and restoring circulation in patients who have severe coronary artery disease and thus repairing that heart. Secondly, the risk of the operation in terms of long-term of survival, long-term function, and always providing the individual enough extension of life that is reasonably satisfactory for the patient is so small.

DANCY: Despite that Doctor Norman Shumway of California’s Stanford University Medical Center has continued doing transplants. He contends he and his team of doctors are learning from each operation and their rate of success is increasing. Last year, they did an average of one transplant a month, and more than half the patients are still alive, largely because the doctors are slowly learning how to use drugs to stave off rejection. Doctor John Schroeder is the man in charge of keeping transplant patients alive.

DR. JOHN SCHROEDER, Cardiologist: I think one thing that gives us hope as far as cardiac
transplantation that is-- is that over a period of a year or two, the body seems to gradually adapt to this foreign heart and seems to accept it. And during the first few months, the body actually mounts quite a vigorous rejection episode and it-- it-- it mounts the white cells that try to kill this-- this heart, this foreign tissue. But each rejection episode is further apart than the last and usually less strong.

DANCY: More than three years ago, Carl Sheaffer, a retired plumber with a long history of heart disease, received the heart of a twenty-year-old man. His body has tried to reject the new heart several times. But each time the doctors have been able to fight rejection. Now Sheaffer is able to hunt fish and exercise everyday at a local gym.

CARL SHEAFFER, Heart Transplant Patient: I never sorry for a minute, I go back up on the table again and get it all done over again. And I really enjoy living now. I used to be-- before I used to be like an old bear. Just had pain in everybody I’d snap back. Just worth living that’s all. But now I recommend it to anybody.

DANCY: The number of survivors like Carl Sheaffer is growing, true. But while the doctors are learning to keep patients alive longer, a heart transplant is still surgery of the last resort. It will be a long time before it is anything else.

John Dancy, NBC News, at the Stanford Medical Center.