

The amazing women who play a vital role in kidney patients' lives

Ken Merkley

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Thursday is World Kidney Day, an occasion established three years ago to recognize the worldwide need for improved kidney health. Last Saturday was International Women's Day.

These two special days are linked in my mind -- and in my heart.

In British Columbia and around the world, there are thousands of women who are either partners/caregivers or health care professionals involved in helping others with kidney disease; or they are the patients themselves, raising families and holding down jobs while undergoing treatment for kidney disease.

The extraordinary women in my life are my wife, Bernadette, and my daughter Christina.

I have had kidney disease for 26 years. During that time, Bernadette's care and support included acting as my home hemodialysis assistant, while caring for our children, working full time and taking on most, and at times all, of the house and yard work.

Bernadette, like so many women who are homemakers and caregivers for kidney patients, learned the ins and outs of a proper kidney diet, re-worked family recipes to exclude "non-kidney-friendly" elements such as sodium, potassium and phosphorus while somehow managing to provide delicious meals.

She became an avid label reader, and can still quote how many milligrams of salt are in a 10-ounce can of soup. (The answer is too many -- don't eat that!).

Then there is my daughter Christina, the amazing woman who gave me one of her kidneys. Christina travelled from San Francisco to Vancouver where she recovered in hospital and at our home in Victoria for four weeks before heading



CREDIT: Bruce Stotesbury, Canwest News Service files

Ken Merkley with daughter Christina who donated one of her kidneys to him.
Thursday is World Kidney Day.

back to pick up her life and her career. Words fail when I think of her personal gift to my good health.

When I realize the contribution these two women have made to the quality of my life, I think of all the other women involved in renal care who play a vital part in the well-being of all kidney patients.

Dr. Adeera Levin, Nephrologist (kidney specialist) and executive director of the BC Renal Agency, is a dedicated physician and researcher who never stops looking for ways to improve the quality of life for patients with kidney disease.

Dr. Nancy Craven, medical lead, Vancouver Island Kidney Care Initiative, works with the Kidney Care Clinic team of dietitians, nurses and social workers to help kidney patients manage their condition and make the lifestyle changes necessary to keep them as healthy as possible for as long as possible.

A family doctor for many years, Craven now also works with other GPs to implement guideline-based care for their kidney patients.

In Prince George, there is nurse Angela Robinson, who helps people with acute kidney disease in the northern region of the province to achieve greater independence and better health through home hemodialysis.

Then there are the patients themselves. The Okanagan's Teresa Atkinson, a 25-year kidney patient who is also a wife, mother, and grandmother is another example of someone who helped lead the way for people with kidney disease who live in remote areas of the province.

Teresa participated in the pilot program for independent night-time hemodialysis, which enables kidney patients, who are able, to dialyze at home. This creates better outcomes and eliminates the need for dialysis patients to travel for their thrice-weekly treatments to their closest dialysis centre, which is sometimes a two- or three-hour drive away.

Hilda Gregory of Vancouver, the 71-year-old former school principal who devoted her career to working with deaf children, was diagnosed with kidney disease in 1997, yet never let her disease or dialysis treatments slow her down.

Hilda is a recipient of the Order of British Columbia, the Order of Canada and the YWCA Women of Distinction Award for her lifetime of work with deaf children and extensive volunteer activities.

The women cited here -- and many more -- have played a terrific role in caring for others, or courageously managing their own lives when kidney disease has struck.

So, I say thanks to all the women in B.C. involved in the province's "kidney network," which includes renal programs in all health authorities, the Kidney Foundation of Canada, B.C. Branch, and the B.C. Provincial Renal Agency (an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority.)

March is Kidney Health Month. More than 145,000 British Columbians live with

some form of kidney disease.

During March, approximately 8,000 volunteers will be canvassing door-to-door to raise funds for research, improved treatment and increased programs and services for kidney patients. These dedicated volunteers also work to raise awareness about the need for kidney health.

As a kidney patient (yes, even though I have a transplanted kidney, I am still a kidney patient -- transplantation is not a cure -- but it is a wonderful treatment), I urge everyone to talk to their physicians about kidney disease, because early-stage symptoms are easily misunderstood or ignored.

And please give generously when a March Drive canvasser comes to call.

Ken Merkley is president the Kidney Foundation of Canada, B.C. Branch.

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