



Mr Law Leh Ping (seated, right), who had a simultaneous pancreas-kidney transplant in 2019, and Associate Professor Tiong Ho Yee (seated, left), director of the National Pancreas Transplant Programme. With them are (standing, from left) the National University Centre for Organ Transplantation's Associate Professor Glenn Bonney, a consultant; Ms Joreen Poh, a senior transplant coordinator; and Dr Hersharan Kaur Sran, a senior consultant. PHOTO: NATIONAL UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL

# National wait list set up for pancreas transplants

Such operations can improve severe diabetics' quality of life, reduce long-term complications

Nadine Chua

Patients who need a pancreas transplant will now be placed on a national wait list to get the operation, with Singaporeans and permanent residents eligible for subsidies under a new national programme.

This will ensure that potential pa-

tients at all hospitals are identified and screened for pancreas transplant suitability.

Those on the wait list can expect to wait around two years to receive a new pancreas.

This organ produces insulin that helps control blood glucose levels.

For severe diabetics who do not produce sufficient insulin, a pancreas transplant can improve their quality of life and reduce long-term diabetic complications such as kidney failure, blindness and stroke.

After a successful transplant, the pancreas should be able to produce sufficient insulin to control the patient's blood sugar.

The national programme was approved by the Ministry of Health in April, making Singapore the only South-east Asian country with a pancreas transplant service.

The National University Hospital (NUH) and Singapore General Hospital transplant units first collaborated on a pilot pancreas transplant service in 2012.

A pancreas transplant is most

commonly performed with a kidney transplant, known as simultaneous pancreas-kidney (SPK) transplant, Associate Professor Tiong Ho Yee, director of the National Pancreas Transplant Programme, told the media yesterday.

He explained that diabetes is a major cause of kidney failure.

An SPK transplant improves the quality of life for diabetic patients compared with a kidney transplant alone, as they will no longer need to take regular insulin injections or undergo dialysis treatments, he said.

"This is the only treatment to establish normal sugar levels in patients with diabetes without the need for external insulin injections," said Prof Tiong.

One SPK transplant has been performed since April, while four such operations were successfully carried out during the pilot.

The national programme also offers pancreas-only transplants and pancreas after kidney transplants.

About 19,000 people here are diagnosed with diabetes each year.

According to the Singapore renal registry annual report 2019, diabetes is the number one cause of kidney failure here, accounting for about two in three new patients

needing dialysis.

Speaking at an event to mark World Diabetes Day on Nov 14, Health Minister Ong Ye Kung said one in three individuals in Singapore is at risk of developing diabetes in their lifetime.

"If nothing is done, by 2050, it is estimated that about one million Singaporeans will be living with diabetes," said Mr Ong.

Singaporeans and permanent residents are covered by the national programme, and eligible patients will benefit from Ministry of Health subsidies for the transplant operation, which will be carried out at NUH in the next two years.

Without the subsidies, patients may have to fork out around \$80,000.

Mr Halim Anuwar was the first to undergo an SPK transplant under the national programme in July.

The 39-year-old ambulance driver said: "It was shocking and unexpected to receive the call from NUH that I could undergo the transplant."

He added: "I'm recovering well now... I'm back at work. I no longer have to attend dialysis treatments and can now lead a normal life."

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## I was given a new life, says diabetic

Since 2014, undergoing four-hour dialysis treatments three times a week had become a routine for Mr Law Leh Ping.

But the 50-year-old technician no longer needs to go for dialysis after undergoing a simultaneous pancreas-kidney (SPK) transplant in April 2019. He is the first person in Singapore with Type 2 diabetes to go for such an operation.

Mr Law, who was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes in his 20s, required insulin injections in his 40s when his blood glucose level could not be controlled.

Significant kidney function deterioration later meant he needed dialysis.

"It took up a lot of time, because I had to leave work early three times a week and rush for my dialysis."

He said: "This meant that I also could not travel overseas for long periods of time. At most, I could take a day trip to Malaysia."

Diabetes is a condition where there is too much sugar in the blood, which is damaging to the body and can lead to heart disease, kidney damage and even blindness.

Type 1 diabetes is genetic and unpreventable. It occurs because the pancreas does not produce enough insulin, a hormone that controls blood glucose levels.

Type 2 is the most common form of diabetes where the body is unable to use insulin properly. Its most common cause is obesity and an inactive lifestyle.

Mr Law's transplant was one of four SPK operations successfully done in a pilot pancreas transplant service started in 2012, as a collaboration between the transplant units of National University Hospital and Singapore General Hospital.

The pancreas transplant service was approved as a national programme by the Health Ministry in April.

Dr Hersharan Kaur Sran, said: "Although most people on the wait list have Type 2 diabetes, many of them are not eligible for the simultaneous pancreas-kidney transplant because they do not fit the criteria, which is they must be on insulin and not overweight."

"Some of them may also have other medical conditions which make them unfit for the transplant."

The senior consultant at the National University Centre for Organ Transplantation said Mr Law was deemed suitable as he was on insulin and his weight was stable.

Mr Law said: "The transplant was a rare opportunity. When I had to undergo frequent dialysis treatments, my children were really worried about me. Now, it feels like I was given a new life."

Nadine Chua