

Cost Per Life: \$22,000

By Richard J. Margolis

HERE in my study, while late afternoon light laps the wall, I dialyze and ruminate. The subjects of my ruminations are life, death and the flag.

My brand of dialysis is relatively new — not hemodialysis, which uses a machine to cleanse one's blood, but a simpler, more homely brew. From a hook above my head, a plastic bag of sugar water slowly drips its contents through a tube that leads into my abdominal cavity. From below, another bag has just drained off fluids from the previous "exchange."

What I'm doing is called continuous ambulatory peritoneal dialysis. It does for me what my failed kidneys ought to be doing but can't: siphons off some waste products. I carry out these exchanges four times a day, seven days a week. Gravity and sugar water, with an assist from Medicare, have kept me alive for 15 months, since my kidneys stopped working. Dialysis is a therapy only death or a kidney transplant can terminate. I am wait-listed for both.

Today, I pass the time pondering the connection between my body and the body politic. This turns out to be a sedentary form of flag-waving. What startles me is how promptly the U.S. rushed to my rescue. How did it come to pass that at age 60 I began receiving benefits from a Federal program aimed at people 65 and up?

The short answer is a piece of legislation called "End Stage Renal Disease" on Capitol Hill. Tacked onto Medicare in 1972, it provides health care dollars to nearly everyone afflicted with kidney disease. Age doesn't matter. The long answer depends on who gets credit for pushing the legislation.

My favorite version of the story starts with Marion Hilger of Columbus, Ind. In the 1960's, she served on the Indiana state welfare board. A committee she headed had responsibility for visiting dialysis patients and deciding who was worthy of receiving state support and who was not. For all but the wealthiest, rejection meant almost certain death.

One evening, Ms. Hilger rushed home to a party she was giving for Vance Hartke, a Senator at the time. As he now remembers: "Marion was late to her own party. She walked in the door and came straight at me. She just put her head on my shoulder and cried. She said I had to do something for all those people who were dying because they couldn't pay for dialysis. She told me she was tired of

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playing God. I think that was the first I'd heard about the problem."

Later, Senator Hartke learned much more. A report published in 1971 by the National Institutes of Health estimated that of 7,500 people suffering from kidney disease the previous year, 1,250 had been given dialysis treatment, 917 had received transplants and 5,333 had died.

On Sept. 30, 1972, a Saturday, Mr. Hartke stood up in the Senate and proposed that the Social Security bill be amended to extend Medicare coverage to victims of renal failure. He said: "How do we explain that the difference between life and death is a matter of dollars? How do we explain that those who are wealthy have a greater chance to enjoy a longer life than those who are not?" The debate lasted 30 minutes; with nearly half the Senators absent, the measure was adopted, 52 to 3.

We renal survivors are proof that American ingenuity, famed these days for death-dealing technology, can also sustain life. Last year, the program spent nearly \$3.3 billion on behalf of 150,000 with failed kidneys. Each survived by means of dialysis or a kidney transplant. The cost per life saved came to \$22,000; a transplant costs about \$40,000.

Is that a reasonable price to pay in support of the living? In the gulf, we spent perhaps a half-billion dollars daily subsidizing death. Few taxpayers have complained. Is it different with life? Many seem to think so.

The measure enacted that Saturday has generated fiscal regrets and grumbling. "Medicareless" is how a New York Times editorial described the legislation 19 years ago. From then on, the legislation has been a

How the U.S. saves those on dialysis.

favorite target of tax-cutters and cost-containment mavens. Not that any of this should surprise us. Nobody waves the flag for Medicare. Still, watching life's elixir trickle into my body, I wish for a world in which our errands of mercy were as ardently admired as our sorties of destruction.

Now it is the twilight's last gleaming. The bag overhead is empty and my peritoneum is full. I reach up and shut off the valves. I have lived through another sunset.

Perhaps I shall live through many more. Two days after I wrote this, I received a new kidney. □

For
Dave
Raphael
from
RJM