

*UNMC's world-class organ transplant program continues to evolve as it enters its third decade.*

# The gift of life

by Tom O'Connor

**T**hey come in a cooler – the kind you'd bring to a neighborhood block party. They sit on a bed of ice inside three layers of storage bags and surrounded by a clear solution. They feature a wide variety with many different shapes and sizes.

But, the contents of these coolers are like nothing you'll ever see at a block party. The cargo is precious.

Inside is the ultimate gift of all – the gift of life.

The coolers contain organs destined for people who – without them – will die.

Saving lives is what medical centers do. At UNMC and its hospital partner, The Nebraska Medical Center, more than 4,500 lives have been saved through organ transplantation since 1970. The vast majority of these transplants have taken place since the mid-1980s when the medical center made the commitment to become a solid organ transplant center.

At that time, only about a dozen surgeons in the country had received extended, formal training in liver transplantation. One of those surgeons was Byers (Bud) Shaw, M.D. Like the other surgeons, Dr. Shaw trained at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. He was eager to begin his own program, and he could do that just about any place in the world.

As a favor to an old friend, he accepted the invitation to make a visit to UNMC, even though

he had no desire to move to Nebraska. Little did he know what he would find.

"Everyone I met was not only enthusiastic, but also extremely well prepared," he said. "The leaders in Nebraska fully understood the need for a comprehensive team approach. Nowhere else had I encountered

such dedication and preparation."

Twenty-one years later, Dr. Shaw is still in Omaha. He handed over the reins of the transplantation program to Alan Langnas, D.O., in 1997, when he was named professor and chairman of the UNMC Department of Surgery.

But, the quality and spirit of the transplantation program instilled by Dr.



Shaw continues. "Our organ transplant program is one of the few things in the state – besides Nebraska football – that we are known for," Dr. Shaw said.

"One thing has never changed. People who come here say they've never been treated so well. From the moment they arrive, they are treated with respect and genuine concern."

How can Nebraska be so much better? It starts with the people, Dr. Shaw said. "We've been able to attract really good people and once here, they want to stay. They like coming to work. They like what they are doing, and they do a good job."

Teamwork is the key, Dr. Langnas said. "We have a multi-disciplinary group made up of health professionals from almost every area of medicine. They work together to deliver state-of-the-art care to our patients."

Dr. Langnas said the organ transplant program has evolved over the years. Today, through research and innovation, the transplant team is doing more transplants than ever, but also is looking for ways to help patients avoid an organ transplant.

Examples of this include:

- Research being done by Ira Fox, M.D., to look for ways to infuse healthy liver cells into a diseased liver in lieu of a liver transplant;
- Treatment of liver cancer using a novel approach of

combining radio frequency ablation and chemotherapy injections directly into the liver;

- For people in need of an intestinal transplant, Deb Sudan, M.D., has established an Intestinal Rehabilitation Program that often allows patients to avoid transplantation through a strict diet and an innovative bowel-lengthening surgical procedure.

Dr. Langnas praised the research work of Lucile Wrenshall, M.D., Ph.D., who is studying the influence of the extracellular matrix, the "glue" which holds cells together, on the immune system. From this research, Dr. Wrenshall's team hopes to minimize organ rejection by decreasing immune responses to the transplanted organ.

The UNMC inventory list for transplantation has grown to include heart, kidney, liver, pancreas and small bowel. Over the past four years, an average of 220 transplants have been performed annually at the medical center.

Last year, the UNMC transplant team performed the most pediatric kidney and small bowel transplants in the country. UNMC also performed the most pediatric liver transplants in the United States in 2005. The small bowel transplant program is now one of the three most active programs in the country. In addition, the heart transplant program has been re-established over the past year and has never been more active.

Transplants are no longer solely dependent on patients receiving organs from people who die, Dr. Langnas said. Today, an increasing number of kidney and liver transplants are done with the organ being donated by a living family member or friend and sometimes even by total strangers. In recent months, the kidney transplant team has been doing living donor transplants involving people with incompatible blood types.

Kidney transplants are on the rise, Dr. Langnas said, and are now running neck-and-neck with liver transplants as the two most frequent transplants performed at the medical center.

Each year, the transplant program celebrates its successes by holding a reunion in Omaha for all past organ recipients and their families.

Needless to say, it's quite a block party. *D*

