

Transplant Doctor named top U of C Grad

Dr. Jeffery Veale, a transplant surgeon and University of Calgary alumnus who revolutionized the system of kidney donations in the United States, was awarded the 2009 Graduate of the Last Decade Award at the school's Arch Awards this year.

Veale, a doctor at the Ronald Regan UCLA Medical Centre in Santa Monica, Calif., helped pioneer a system of paired recipients to contribute their organs to a donor chain swap, so donors and recipients all across the US are matched.

"The simplified version of this is, if your mom was on dialysis and you wanted to donate your kidney to her, and my mom was on dialysis and I wanted to donate my kidney to her, and neither of us matched or mom's, we could swap," the former Calgarian said. "In the past, our moms would wait on dialysis for five years until an organ from a deceased became available, but five years is a long time to wait."

As a result of Veale's donor chain system, which he says he adopted from Dr. Michael Rees of the University of Toledo in Ohio, lives have been saved, patient wait times have decreased and outcomes have improved because the transplanted kidneys perform longer.

"Thirty to 40 percent of recipients have a willing, living donor that they don't match with, and so it makes sense to make use of our resources and expand our living donor pool," he said. "I'm surprised we haven't thought of it earlier because it could potentially revolutionize transplantation."

Veale, who grew up in Calgary and graduated from the U of C with a B.Sc. in 1997 and an MD in 2000, is an assistant professor of surgery at UCLA's Davis Geffen School of Medicine and director of the UCLA Donor Exchange Program. He is also a member of the National Kidney Registry, an online program that lists potential donors and recipients across the country and tries to find matches – the ensures 95 percent of patients needing a kidney get one in under six months.

While Veale said he was extremely honoured to be bestowed with the Graduate of the Last Decade Award from his alma mater, he admitted he had ulterior motives for returning to his home town.

"A chain has not been started in Canada yet, and would love to see one started up here," he said. "I'm using the award as a platform to try and promote starting one here, to get more Canadians off the waiting list. To me, it's a no-brainer, it just makes perfect sense."

"If you're in Calgary and you need a transplant your wife doesn't match, maybe your match is in Los Angeles. And so I would like to see us exchange kidneys between countries. I'm convinced it will happen, it's just a matter of time."

Veale's donor chain system may also spread elsewhere in the world after it was featured on a recent episode of the television medical drama *Grey's Anatomy*.

"What happened is our chain in Los Angeles received a lot of media attention, and one of the writers on the show read about it and decided to write it into an episode," Veale said.

"I didn't see it myself, but I think it's great that the idea is out there in the mainstream. It helps us emphasize that there is a real human angle to this, that when your loved one receives a kidney, that you want to help out another family in need. And these families often become close friends afterwards, and that's a beautiful thing to see."