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An Organ Donor's Generosity Raises the Question of How Much Is Too Much

By STEPHANIE STROM

PHILADELPHIA, Aug. 12— Having already given one kidney to a total stranger, Zell Kravinsky was sipping an orange-mango Snapple and, unprompted, making a case for giving away his other one.

“What if someone needed it who could produce more good than me?” Mr. Kravinsky said today in an interview. “What if I was a perfect match for a dying scientist who was the intellectual driving force behind a breakthrough cure for cancer or AIDS or on the brink of unlocking the secrets of cell regeneration?”

The consequences of Mr. Kravinsky giving away his other kidney are apparent — he would die. The ethical questions such a gift would raise for transplant surgeons would also make it highly unlikely.

But Mr. Kravinsky sees the choice as a fairly clear one. “I’d be a schnook not to give it to him,” he said. “He could save millions of lives, and I can’t.”

Talking to Mr. Kravinsky, 48, is unsettling. His brand of altruism borders on obsession, perhaps even a sort of benign madness, although he was subjected to a battery of psychiatric tests before the hospital would accept him as a kidney donor.

“I think it makes people feel guilty,” said Barry Katz, a longtime friend of Mr. Kravinsky’s. “I don’t think I’m a bad person. I give money to charity, and I think I’m fairly generous, but on the other hand, when I look at what he’s done, I can’t help but notice a little voice in the back of my head saying, what have you done lately, why haven’t you saved someone’s life?”

Mr. Kravinsky’s latest charitable gesture, donating his kidney to a stranger, is still relatively rare, with 134 such donations in the United States since 1998, according to the United Network for Organ Sharing, and it stirred controversy among his friends and relatives.

His wife, Emily, a psychiatrist, has threatened to divorce him, Mr. Kravinsky said, worried that his altruism is coming at the expense of their four children. The Kravinskys have given away \$15 million, with Mr. Kravinsky promising to give away virtually everything the family has.

Mr. Kravinsky lost two friends over the kidney donation, and even his parents are struggling to repress their anger.

“You can give money, you can give service, said Reeda Kravinsky, his mother, 77. “Body parts are quite another thing.

“You give them to family members, and even that’s a great sacrifice, but it’s understandable. But in Zell’s circumstance, I don’t understand it and I don’t agree with it.”

Mr. Kravinsky says he is only applying the principle of “maximum human utility,” explaining, “My life is not worth more than anyone else’s.”

Mr. Kravinsky said the only argument against altruistic kidney donation — those given to strangers — that has any validity for him is the one pressed by his wife and parents, who asked what he would do if one of his children needed a kidney and he had none to give.

But, he said, he considered the probability of that happening, the probability of him being alive and having a healthy enough kidney, the probability that a sibling would not be a better donor, the

probability that organ donation will still be a necessity.

“I thought about all that and decided that the probabilities simply didn’t outweigh the life of my recipient,” he said. “I love my children, I really do. But I just can’t say their lives are more valuable than any other life.”

He is not sure how much his children know about his kidney donation. He said his wife had tried to keep the news about it from them.

In a telephone interview, Dr. Kravinsky declined to discuss the impact of her husband’s kidney donation on their marriage and family. She said she had responded to a reporter’s call because Mr. Kravinsky’s actions would increase altruistic kidney donations and she wanted others like him to fully understand the system.

Dr. Kravinsky cited a study in the latest New England Journal of Medicine, for instance, that found fewer than one-half of the people who could donate their organs did so when they died.

“The system is not well run,” she said, “and although I’m not opposed to altruistic donations across the board, you have to wonder why it is, if we’re not getting the donations we could from cadavers, we are looking at living donors.”

Dr. Kravinsky also said transplant programs working with altruistic donors needed to include their families more.

Mr. Kravinsky said he had put aside money for his children’s college education, but the Kravinskys live very modestly in a slightly dilapidated-looking house they bought for \$141,600 in 1996 in Jenkintown, a Philadelphia suburb. He said they lived on \$50,000 generated by rental income on property he owns.

He made his fortune in property, buying up housing units around the University of Pennsylvania campus when he was a lecturer teaching Renaissance literature and then moving into commercial real estate.

His \$15 million in donations in cash and property included a \$6.2 million gift to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as gifts to a school for disturbed children and to the Ohio State University School of Public Health.

[On Friday the Ohio State University School of Public Health announced an additional \$30 million gift from the Kravinskys.]

“He didn’t have to do any more,” said Irving Kravinsky, his 88-year-old father.

His parents knew he was considering donating a kidney. They had expressed their objections, heatedly, and thought he had dropped the notion — until their phone rang early on the morning of July 22.

It was Emily Kravinsky, wondering if her husband was there.

In fact, Mr. Kravinsky was in the hospital, donating his kidney to Donnell Reid, a young woman whom he had never met.

“We were shocked,” Irving Kravinsky said. “We thought we still had time to discuss it.”

Somewhat sheepishly, Mr. Kravinsky said: “I snuck out. I was afraid they would do something to stop me, threaten the hospital with a lawsuit or something.”

His mother said she believed the hospital that handled the transplant, the Albert Einstein Medical Center in Philadelphia, used her son.

“They wanted a poster boy, and they exploited him terribly,” she said. “But he doesn’t see it.”

Dr. Radi Zaki, the surgeon who performed the transplant, said he had tried to talk Mr. Kravinsky out of the donation many times.

“We did not seek him out or look for him in any way,” Dr. Zaki said. “He came to us and was very persistent.”

Mr. Kravinsky concedes that the attention his act has attracted is gratifying.

“I didn’t expect to get publicity, but I won’t deny that it feeds my vanity,” he said.

But Mr. Kravinsky said his main goal was to increase kidney donations, particularly among African-Americans, where there are cultural barriers to organ donation. He is white and the recipient of his kidney is African-American.

He said he was even considering breaking federal law and offering to pay someone to give their kidney away to a stranger.

“No one should have a vacation home until everyone has a place to live,” he said. “No one should have a second car until everyone has one. And no one should have two kidneys until everyone has one.”

Notes

¹<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/17/us/an-organ-donor-s-generosity-raises-the-question-of-how-much-is-too-much.html>