

GIFT OF LIFE AN EARLY CHRISTMAS FOR LUCKY SEVEN

**THE STATE'S TOP
TRANSPLANT SURGEONS
PULLED OFF A RECORD
14 SURGERIES IN JUST
ONE DAY, WRITES
CARLEEN FROST AND
GRANT MCARTHUR**

It's the country's largest live organ matchmaking service and it's just saved the lives of seven very lucky people. In a marathon series of interconnected surgeries across NSW and Victoria, each patient has received a kidney from one of seven real-life guardian angels.

In an Australian first, surgeons performed 14 interconnected procedures to remove and transplant the kidneys, with flights crisscrossing Sydney and Melbourne for the record domino-effect exchange on November 10.

Each recipient came into the group with a loved one willing to donate a kidney — but was not compatible with them — but agreed to take part in the swap so that their friend or family member could get the vital organ from someone else.

The Saturday Telegraph has been granted exclusive details on the secret lifesaving mission, with all but a select few who either gave or received a kidney asked to remain anonymous to ensure that the exact chain in the donation process can remain under wraps.

The mammoth task combined the work of

hundreds of nurses, surgeons, organisational and support staff across Westmead, Prince of Wales and John Hunter hospitals in NSW as well as Victoria's Monash Medical Centre, Royal Melbourne, and Austin hospitals, all in just one busy day.

Each person who took part is now recovering well but the day wasn't without drama as medical experts had to battle to overcome a slight "hiccup" when a malfunctioning aircraft was forced to return to Sydney mid-flight with a Melbourne-bound kidney.

Five hours later the organ finally arrived in Melbourne in good health, where the team at



THE RACE TO FIND A PARTNER

- At 8am on November 19 simultaneous operations began at seven operating theatres across NSW and Victoria to remove the kidneys from their donors.

- As two of the kidneys removed in Melbourne were couriered across town to be immediately

transplanted into Victorian patients, another two were being taken to Melbourne Airport so they could be flown by Qantas to Sydney.

- At the same time in Sydney two kidneys were en route to Sydney Airport so they could be flown to

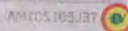
Melbourne recipients while Startrack sent another across the city for a NSW patient.

- By 12.23pm the first kidney arrived and was taken off the ice in a Victorian hospital, allowing the first of the seven transplants began.

- As five other kidneys

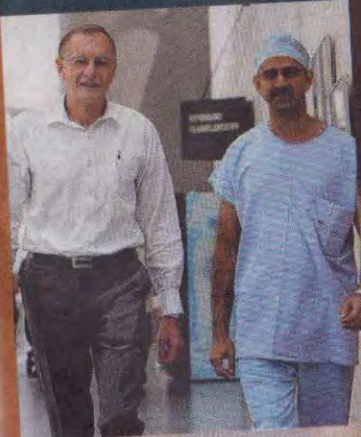
progressively arrived at their destinations each surgical team examined the organs and passed them fit for transplantation, with recipients then wheeled into operating theatres as their synchronised surgeries followed throughout the afternoon.

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Dr Shannon Thomas



Left, Paul Trevillion, director of transplantation Hunter New England Local Health and transplant surgeon Munish Heer at John Hunter Hospital, Newcastle. Picture: Peter Lorimer.

Austin Hospital was able to begin the final transplant at 9.30pm.

The amazing surgeries took three months of delicate planning and Australian Paired Kidney Exchange program director Dr Paolo Ferrari says the transplants were "an amazing team effort" consisting of dozens of medical staffers from each participating hospital.

He described the feat as a

GAIL'S NEW LIFE FROM ONE KIND STRANGER

CARLEEN FROST

SHE doesn't know who gave her a second chance at life, why they did it or where they came from.

And whoever gave up one of their kidneys for Gail Livingston has no idea that it's gone to the mother-of-two from southwest Sydney, gifting her a future with her loving husband and two children.

It's a mystery those at the Australian Paired Kidney Exchange Program will do everything they can to keep under wraps but one the 53-year-old is more than happy to honour.

The former childcare worker is humbled that she was able to pay it forward in some way after one of her family members anonymously donated their kidney to a sick patient in the same series of record-breaking operations on November 19.

The relative desperately



kind of matchmaking or dating service for kidneys.

"Because of the excitement on that day — mostly because of the complexity of having all the centres involved and the little hiccup — there was a lot of tension," Dr Ferreri says.

"Eventually it all panned out very nicely and everyone was very mindful that it was complex so put in the best effort to make it happen."

The Australian Paired Kidney Exchange organises organ transplants when a person desperate for a kidney has a loved one willing to donate but their organ has an incompatible blood or tissue type.

Rather than give up, the incompatible pair's details are placed into a pool where they are matched with other donor-recipient pairs until each is matched with a suitable swap.

In order to receive a kidney from a live donor each recipient's loved one must also be matched and no operations are undertaken until the circle is closed — no matter how complicated the swap ends up becoming.

Prince of Wales director of transplant surgery Dr Koroush Haghighi says he was receiving text messages every 10-15 minutes throughout the November 19 mission to ensure his part in the mammoth series of operations went to plan.

He even sent a photo of the transacted kidney to the doctor charged with inserting it into its new owner soon after it was taken out.

"The operation is the same,

it's the operation we always do but it's hard work to organise all the patients at the same time," he says.

At the same hospital that afternoon, vascular and transplant surgeon Dr Shannon Thomas was responsible for receiving a kidney and inserting it into one of the seven lucky recipients.

He says there was a great deal of pressure and a little anxiety that his link in the chain wasn't broken, putting the other procedures in jeopardy.

"It's quite routine for us. But when there's 14 operations you don't want your operation to be the one that lets the whole thing down."

Hunter New England Local Health District director of transplantation Paul Trevillion co-ordinated two surgeries — a donor and a recipient — at Newcastle's John Hunter Hospital.

Dr Trevillion says it was the first time he had been involved in a seven-way transplant, after previously working on three and five-way operations.

"It always causes a lot of excitement and a bit of anxiety," he says.

"The surgical team have an enormous responsibility whenever they are operating with a live patient because they are operating on a patient who is perfectly healthy and they don't want to change that," he says.

wanted to give her their kidney but was not compatible and so it was given away to a needy recipient as part of the seven-way swap.

Both underwent operations on the same day at Westmead Hospital supported by other members of their family.

"There's just the sense that someone out there gave me a life," Mrs Livingston told the Telegraph.

"It's an amazing gift and it would be wonderful to say thank you.

"The one thing that we can do is write a thankyou card and a co-ordinator will hand it on.

"I am just so grateful."

The transplant has allowed Mrs Livingston a new lease on life after struggling with polycystic kidney disease for decades.

It has seen her living on as little as 22 per cent kidney function and enduring gruelling dialysis three times a week.

Two of her brothers also suffer from the disorder — one has already had a kidney transplant and another may need one in the future.

"I spent nine days in Nepean Hospital — I just couldn't keep water down and I couldn't stand up," she says.

"After that I started dialysis three times a week, four times a day."

Patient Gail Livingston at Westmead Hospital after recovering from a successful kidney transplant and (left) Dr Paolo Ferreri and the kidney transplant team Dr Koroush Haghighi, Dr Shannon Thomas and program co-ordinator Claudia Woodroffe at Prince of Wales Hospital. Pictures: Adam Taylor, Sam Ruttin