

Saving lives

one heart at a time

A young patient cherishes the gift of life

Six days after his 20th birthday, Kurt Oblinger found out that his heart was failing due to cardiomyopathy. The Cincinnati native was rushed to Ohio Heart and Vascular Center (OHVC) at The Christ Hospital.

People of all ages can be struck down by cardiomyopathy, and often they are young and athletic like Kurt. Alexei Cherepanov, a 19 year old professional ice hockey player nicknamed the "Siberian Express," died of cardiomyopathy during an ice hockey game. Reggie Lewis, captain and all-star of the Boston Celtics, died from cardiomyopathy at age 27. Just this year, Andy Hallett, a 33 year old actor from the television series "Angel," died of congestive heart failure, brought on by cardiomyopathy.

Cardiomyopathy literally means "heart muscle disease." The muscle becomes inflamed and begins to falter, and in severe cases like Kurt's, threatens to stop altogether.

Three days later, Kurt was lying in the hospital waiting for the doctors to decide on his treatment, when another blow struck.

His older brother Keith was driving to the hospital to be with his kid brother when his car hit a patch of ice and skidded off the road into a creek bed. By the time the car was discovered, Keith was dead. The distraught parents, with their oldest son dead and the youngest one fighting for his life, made a decision. They decided not to tell Kurt that his brother was gone.

But a well-meaning friend let it slip. "I was lying there in the hospital," Kurt remembers, "and my buddy calls me up and says, 'Hey Kurt, I'm sorry about your brother.' That's how I came to find out."

When the doctors told Kurt he was too sick to attend the funeral, he was devastated. So the concerned OHVC staff got together and devised a way for him to go to his brother's private wake.

Kurt remembers the day well. "Dr. Santosh Menon, along with a couple of nurses and medics, put me in an ambulance and transported me to the funeral home. I was on a gurney. They rolled me up to Keith's casket to say goodbye. I kind of held his arm--that was all I could reach from my bed. I'm not a very public crier. I just looked at him and said, 'Why?'"

The next morning Kurt went into emergency surgery.

To this day, he doesn't know for sure what caused his cardiomyopathy. It could have been congenital. His brother Keith had suffered from a milder form of congestive heart failure. Or Kurt's could have been viral.

According to the American Heart Association, more than 26,000 deaths each year in the United States are caused by cardiomyopathy. It is the leading cause of heart failure.

"As soon as he became my doctor, I felt relieved. He really went beyond the call of duty."

In Kurt's case, the symptoms came on gradually. "At first, my primary care doctor thought I had the flu. Did the medication; didn't get any better. Then he thought I had asthma. Did the medication; didn't get any better. Finally the doctor took a look at my heart. Turns out, it was only functioning at 10 percent."



Ohio Heart patient, Kurt Oblinger

At OHVC, Kurt was put under the care of Dr. Menon. "As soon as he became my doctor, I felt relieved. He really went beyond the call of duty."

Cardiomyopathy is one of the leading indications for heart transplants. But before he was put on the waiting list, Kurt's doctors performed three other procedures, including two open heart surgeries.

It all began at OHVC, when Dr. Menon implanted a balloon pump. A balloon pump is a mechanical device that reduces the heart's workload and improves the flow of blood to the coronary arteries.

Although Kurt confesses he was scared about the procedure, the nurses later reported that he didn't show it.

He doesn't remember any of it, of course, but the story goes like this: While he was under anesthetics and lying stark naked on the surgical table, he began to belt out the '70s pop hit, "Afternoon Delight." The story quickly made the rounds. Kurt still runs into nurses who tease him about it.

Kurt competed in the 2006 U.S. Transplant Games in Louisville, KY. The Transplant Games offer the transplant recipient and family a chance to honor their donor and donor family.



From Cincinnati, he was transferred to a hospital in Louisville, Kentucky, where he had two open-heart surgeries in one week. The first procedure was to implant a left ventricle assist device (LVAD), a mechanical pump that helps the heart pump blood throughout the body. Sometimes, as in Kurt's case, it's called "a bridge to transplant," because an LVAD helps a patient survive until a heart transplant can be performed.

In less than a week, the doctors opened his heart again, this time to drain the fluid from the sac around his heart. All this took place in March of 2005. But Kurt wasn't put on the transplant list until early April. He needed time to stabilize--too many open-heart surgeries too close together.

Kurt remained in the hospital until the day after Easter. By that time he was on the transplant list, and he went home to Cincinnati to wait. It wasn't certain it would come in time. In Ohio alone, on any given day, there are more than

3,000 people on the list. And every other day, one Ohioan dies while waiting.

But Kurt's new heart was ready for him in a month. "After we got the call, my father drove me to Louisville, and it was quite a ride. We probably averaged about 90 miles an hour. I was supposed to be there in two hours. We made it in a little over an hour. The hospital staff was shocked; they didn't even have my bed ready."

When a reporter asked Kurt if he was scared before the transplant, he admits, "A little. But to be honest, I'd already been through so much, and I knew what was going to happen. I think my first surgery was the scariest."

Kurt's transplant was performed. "When I came out of surgery, it was around Mother's Day. By the time I finally realized I'd already had a transplant, I was in an open-heart recovery room. I had no idea that Mother's Day has already passed, so I asked my sister Mollie what we were getting mom.



Dr. Santosh Menon

"She just smiled and said, 'We're giving her you.'"

Six days later on May 11th, Kurt was released from the hospital. You might think that he would go straight home and rest. But no. He insisted that his family make one stop. In his mind, it was "Skyline time."

"What does that mean, Skyline time?" asked the out-of-state reporter.

"Skyline is a Cincinnati chili," Kurt explained patiently. "You put cheese on top of the chili on top of the spaghetti."

Was it as good as he thought it would be?

"Better-- a drastic change from hospital food," Kurt answered with a smile in his voice.

Now almost four years later, Kurt has graduated from the University of Dayton (December 2007) and started a business career as financial representative for Northwestern Mutual. And he's back playing sports again, which he loves.

"One of guys at work commented that I look like the most unathletic person ever. But you put me in some kind of extreme sport where danger is there, and I'm going to excel. I've been pretty acrobatic on multiple devices--bicycles, roller blades, skis. If it has wheels or if it can go through flight, I'm going to try it out. I'm trying to get as much air time as possible."

Kurt was lucky. It wasn't certain that the transplant would take, much less that in a few months later he would be back performing extreme athletics. But he doesn't attribute this to luck. On his way into the operating room, Kurt made a pledge to God.

"I told him that if He would just help me get through it, I'd be the best person I possibly could, do the most I could for the world. And then after that I knew that everything was going to be all right."

Now Kurt spends much of his spare time doing volunteer work. He's organized a volleyball team for his alma mater's alumni association, plus he works with several other organizations including the National Kidney Foundation. And he volunteers for the U.S. transplant games, an Olympic type event to promote successful organ transplants.

Kurt also does public speaking to promote organ donation programs. "I've spoken to thousands of people. I tell them my story and hope it motivates them. You know, a single organ donor has the ability to save eight lives as well as the ability to enrich the lives of more than 50 people. It's just so important, because there's so much need. It's

one of the most difficult decisions a family has to make, but if you make that decision now, you eliminate their burden later."

Looking back over his whole experience, 24-year-old Kurt's voice warms when he speaks of the The Ohio Heart & Vascular Center staff and especially Dr. Menon. "He is one of the most professional, dedicated doctors that I have ever met or had the pleasure of meeting. As far as personality, he is just an extremely caring, kind-hearted and compassionate individual. I will forever have a special place in my heart for him."

"I would say that I'm pretty blessed. When it comes to the gift of life—receiving that donation—I don't know how much luckier you can get. It's an amazing feeling, and you just count your blessings."

Q&A with Santosh G. Menon, MD, FACC

To learn more about cardiomyopathy and Kurt's story, *Ohio Heart & Vascular News* spoke with Santosh Menon, MD, FACC, a cardiologist with The Ohio Heart & Vascular Center and Director of the Carl and Edyth Lindner Heart Failure Treatment Center at The Christ Hospital. To learn more about our Heart Failure Treatment program, visit www.ohioheartandvascular.com



Santosh G. Menon, MD, FACC

Ohio Heart physician and the Director of the Carl and Edyth Lindner Heart Failure Treatment Center at The Christ Hospital.

Q: *Were Kurt's symptoms the standard seen with cardiomyopathy patients?*

A: Yes, Kurt experienced flu-like symptoms, shortness of breath, and a drop in blood pressure. These symptoms, along with edema (leg swelling) are very common with cardiomyopathy. Cardiomyopathy can affect anyone, at any age, and in varying degrees of severity. In Kurt's case, the condition was extremely serious.

Q: *What was your reaction when you learned about the death of Kurt's brother and the funeral?*

A: This news was tragic. I felt horrible for the family and also very concerned that Kurt's emotional stress would affect his already compromised heart. Kurt made it

very clear that he only had one wish and that was to attend his brother's funeral. There were health risks involved with making the trip but I decided that I would do everything in my power to get Kurt there as safely as possible. I knew that he and I would both regret it the rest of our lives if he did not have an opportunity to say goodbye to his brother. I quickly enlisted the help of our staff and a mobile ICU unit so that we could take Kurt to the funeral in an ambulance. He had to lay flat on a gurney and remain hooked up to equipment the entire time. I was able to monitor his heart throughout the trip to ensure that his condition did not take a turn for the worse. We were only there for about 20 minutes, but Kurt was able to pay his respects before we had to get him back to the hospital.

Q: *Is Kurt one of your most memorable patients?*

A: Absolutely. Getting Kurt to that funeral was one of the most memorable decisions I have made as a physician. I will never forget the strength that Kurt and his family exemplified during a very traumatic time. They are truly a special family. It is wonderful to see Kurt today, living a healthy life and making great contributions through his volunteer work. I am proud of him and honored to have played a role in his care.