Heart recipient grateful to see family grow up; Salmon Arm dad among 1st to get transplant

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Twenty years ago, Tony Beeftink suspected something was wrong with his health after it took him 45 minutes longer than usual to finish running a marathon, despite a year of training.

He remembered struggling through the Stanley Park stretch of the May 1988 Vancouver marathon, and later complaining to his doctor that he would feel awful at the 20-mile point on his runs.

"He said to run 19 miles," said Beeftink, a high school phys ed teacher from Salmon Arm.

But less than a half-year later, his heart, weakened by a virus, landed the 37-year-old father of three in hospital and doctors told him he had six months to live.

Late on Christmas Day, he got a call from the hospital and, on Boxing Day 1988, he became B.C.'s second of 326 heart transplant recipients -- one of more than 2,000 across Canada since 1981.

Beeftink, now a fit 57, told his story at a celebration to mark the 20th anniversary of heart transplants yesterday at St. Paul's Hospital.

Not only is Beeftink one of the 90 per cent who survive for a year after a transplant, but he has doubled the average life expectancy of 10 years for heart recipients.

He has run marathons with his new heart and, this week, he expects to welcome his first grandchild into the world (followed by a second next Easter) and to celebrate his son's wedding, the third of his children to marry.

"How much better than that can it get?" he asked.

Health Minister George Abbott addressed the celebration which, for him, was personal, he said, introducing Beeftink.

"He taught all my kids in school. He's been a great friend and a wonderful member of the community, and in 1988, we almost lost him," he said, choking with emotion as Beeftink blinked away tears. "Tony's been a gift to the Shuswap."

Both men recognized that a transplant recipient's joy can only come at the expense of the pain of a family that has lost a loved one.

Over the past 10 years, 21 patients died waiting for a heart transplant, according to BC Transplant. The average wait for a new heart is four months and there are eight patients on the waiting list now.

"[Organ donation] is something you don't want to bring up at the dinner table, but you should," said Beeftink.

Bill Barrable of BC Transplant, which runs a donor registry, said only 17 per cent of British Columbians have registered.

Research shows that donating organs helps surviving members grieve the loss of the donor, whose identity isn't revealed to the recipient or vice versa, said Barrable.

St. Paul's head of cardiology, Dr. Andy Ignaszewski, told the gathering that research is continuing to determine if artificial hearts, which can keep patients alive for months, can be implanted permanently.

He also said B.C. researchers are close to developing tests with blood or urine to determine organ rejection, tests that now have to be surgically performed with a biopsy.
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