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Exceeding national averages, UT Southwestern lung transplant recipient thrives nearly 20 years later

DALLAS – April 24, 2012 – UT Southwestern Medical Center has performed more than 300 lung transplants in recent decades, and Michael Young represents a remarkable success story.

Mr. Young, 59, of Grand Prairie, whose lungs were ravaged by pulmonary fibrosis, underwent a lung transplant in 1993. Nineteen years later, he is the longest living survivor of UT Southwestern's Lung Transplant Program.

Before his transplant, Mr. Young's lung function was so diminished that he spent his days on oxygen confined to his La-Z-Boy. At night, he was forced to sleep sitting up in order to breathe.

"After my operation, I walked out of the intensive care unit to my patient room and realized I had the capacity to breathe again," Mr. Young said. "It was the most joyous moment of my life."

The Scientific Registry of Transplant Recipients ranks UT Southwestern among the highest in survival rates for one year and three years after surgery. The medical center, which began its lung transplantation program in 1990, has an 86 percent survival rate one year after surgery and a 75 percent survival rate three years after surgery – compared to national averages that are 84 percent and 67 percent, respectively.

"As an academic medical center we bring our advanced research to the bedside, benefiting patients who come to our institution with few remaining alternatives," said Dr. Fernando Torres, associate professor of internal medicine and medical director of the Lung Transplant Program. "Our multidisciplinary team approach creates a close relationship with patients, providing both compassionate and cutting-edge care to an increasing number of transplant patients."

UT Southwestern's treatment of difficult and deadly lung diseases goes above and beyond transplantation surgeries. Recent research undertaken by Dr. Christine Kim Garcia, associate professor of internal medicine and a member of the Eugene McDermott Center for Human Growth & Development, delves into the inherited genetic factors that contribute to the development of pulmonary fibrosis. Her laboratory discovered mutations in the genes encoding telomerase and surfactant protein A2 in patients with pulmonary fibrosis, the same condition that put Young on the transplant list 20 years ago.

Mr. Young's lung transplant, which took place at St. Paul University Hospital, was only the

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fourth such operation undertaken by the medical center.

Today, he relishes the time he spends with his 12-year-old granddaughter Kayla, born seven years after his transplant. Simple pleasures like picking up Kayla from school and weekend family barbecues, once unimaginable, now are commonplace.

“If it weren’t for the operation, I would not have had the joy of helping raise her,” he said. “We are so close and I praise the physicians and staff at UT Southwestern for saving my life.”

Before Steven Songer, 17, became the 301st lung recipient at UT Southwestern around Thanksgiving 2011, doctors gave the Denison resident mere months to live. His case of congenital cystic fibrosis had deteriorated his lung function to a meager 19 percent, and he suffered a collapsed lung just hours before undergoing life-saving bilateral lung transplantation.

Two days later, Mr. Songer was walking the hospital hallways without an oxygen tank, communicating with his friends on Facebook, and working hard to recover in time to attend his high school graduation.

“My feet have not touched the ground since his operation,” said his aunt, Suzanne Moody. “There are not enough words in my vocabulary to express the gratitude I feel toward UT Southwestern. The care and attention we received were perfect – it was exactly what we needed – and it was beyond superb.”

Mr. Songer’s transplant occurred just days before National Donate Life Month in April, which calls attention to the critical shortage of organs, tissues, and eyes available for donation. According to Donate Life Texas, the state’s official donor registry, there are more than 7,000 Texas-based patients currently awaiting transplantation.

“Every April, I would volunteer at a Donate Life table in the lobby of UT Southwestern, encouraging people to become donors,” Mr. Young said. “I am so appreciative of the organ gift I was given. I recommend everyone donates. The Lord doesn’t need them. The worms don’t need them. When you are already gone, you don’t need them anymore. It is a gift of life.”

For information on the Lung Transplant Program, call 214-645-8300.

Visit <http://www.utsouthwestern.edu/patientcare/medicalservices/transplants/lung.html> to learn more about UT Southwestern’s clinical services in lung transplantation.

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