Auckland DHB Media Release
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New Zealand Heart and Lung Transplant Service celebrates 25 years

The New Zealand Heart and Lung Transplant Service, based at Auckland City Hospital, is celebrating 25 years of heart transplants in the country.

On 2 December 1987, the first heart transplant in New Zealand was performed at Greenlane Hospital on a young man by surgeons Mr Ken Graham and Mr Clive Robinson. This saw the introduction of a new era in treatment options available to patients with end-stage heart failure.

Twenty five years later, the Heart Transplant Unit based at Auckland City Hospital is the third-largest in Australasia after St Vincents in Sydney and The Alfred in Melbourne and has performed heart transplants in more than 250 patients.

The hospital’s Cardiology Unit performs an average of 10-14 heart transplants-a-year, mainly in patients with a dilated cardiomyopathy. This is a condition where the heart muscle is weakened, resulting in its enlargement and being unable to pump blood efficiently.

There are currently 15 patients from all over New Zealand on the heart transplant waiting list and in each case it could take up to two years for a suitable donor to become available.

“We are deeply indebted to the donor families who have been able to offer organs for donation at a time of intense grief as result of a sudden and tragic event,” said Dr Peter Ruygrok, Director of the Cardiovascular Unit at Auckland City Hospital.

“Such a donation allows another person to live and provides the donor family some solace in that a part of their loved one lives on,” Dr Ruygrok added.

The transplant programme’s 25th anniversary is also marked by the continuous service of cardiologist Dr Arthur Coverdale, who was involved in the care of the very first heart transplant patient at the Greenlane Hospital.

The Cardiology Unit also operated on the country’s longest-surviving heart transplant recipient, Edwin Telle, who received a new heart 23 years ago when he was 17 years old. Mr Telle, a father of two young children and litigation lawyer, said that prior to being diagnosed with a heart condition, he was fit and healthy.
“Then my life changed overnight. My heart deteriorated. I went into heart failure and was diagnosed with dilated viral cardiomyopathy,” Mr Telle explained.

His heart function rapidly deteriorated to the extent that a heart transplant was his only real option.

His then-cardiologist, Dr Trevor Agnew, provided care leading up to the transplant and care post-transplant until he retired. The two have formed a close bond as result of the doctor-patient relationship and still keep in touch.

“My heart transplant has brought me close to many people, some of which I otherwise may never have met and has probably made my life fuller than it ever could have been. I feel lucky to have had a heart transplant and blessed to still be around and enjoying life to its fullest,” said Mr Telle.

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