Dan and Matt have a great deal in common, although they have never met. Both were in their teens when they were diagnosed with immunoglobulin A nephropathy. Both had inexorable decline in their kidney function in their 20s. They both had kidney transplants—Matt from a step-brother, Dan from a sister initially, and then when that transplant failed, via a paired exchange. Both have been patients of mine for over 10 years.

And both got tattoos after kidney transplant. I knew in advance that Matt and his donor were planning to get matching tattoos, showing a kidney with wings and the transplant date. Dan surprised me: when I pulled up his shirt to listen to his heart and lungs, there it was. His was crafted from a design his sister, who was his first kidney donor, had drawn. I don’t know for sure what prompted these young men to get their tattoos, beyond perhaps a desire to have a permanent and meaningful “ink link” with their donors.

I don’t have a tattoo, but these patients have left similarly indelible marks on me as a physician and nephrologist. Over the many years now that I have taken care of them, we have talked about and navigated through their diagnosis of kidney disease, the need for transplantation, and the goal of avoiding dialysis completely. I told them both that I would have considered it a personal failure if they ended up on dialysis before their transplants.

As nephrologists, we often focus on the numbers—the blood pressure, the creatinine, the potassium, the hemoglobin, and others. During our appointments, we attended to all the medical issues that come with chronic kidney disease and are reflected in these numbers. But what consumed most of our time was dealing with life, not lab results. We talked about girlfriends and relationships, jobs, whether and when to have children, how and whom to ask for a kidney, and—occasionally with tears—their futures.
Dan’s creatinine was almost 12 mg/dL and Matt’s was over 5 mg/dL when they got transplanted. Fortunately, both felt pretty well, and I was able to fulfill my promise to each of them to do my best to help them avoid dialysis before transplant. The creatinines and all the other numbers are recorded in their medical charts. All of those conversations we had aren’t. But my memories of them are nonetheless a permanent part of my own story.

Matt and Dan are both now moving on with their lives, albeit with more medicines and doctor visits than they would probably like to have. I’m a different, hopefully better, doctor for having been part of their stories.

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