Penn to open Philly's first transplant house for patients, family

By Juliana Schatz
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In a positive move for the region's transplant patients, the University of Pennsylvania is converting a run-down fraternity residence into the city's first transplant house, capable of hosting nearly 50 family members and patients for up to four months at reduced rates.

The house, at 40th and Spruce Streets, has been given a spiffy makeover by star architect Rafael Viñoly. Contractors and workers have donated time and material. And the university donated the land, enabling the facility to open July 1.

It could soon be joined by another. The nonprofit Gift of Life says it is working to open a family house this summer for up to 120 patients and family members at Fourth and Callowhill Streets.

The houses underscore a basic need for transplant patients and their relatives. Many play a waiting game for donated organs, becoming fixtures in hospital lobbies and family rooms before and after surgery.

And many travel long distances to regional transplant centers like Philadelphia. Penn estimates that a third of its transplant patients come from more than 50 miles away.

On Tuesday, patients and donors assembled with retired surgeon Clyde F. Barker, who performed the first kidney transplant at Penn in 1966 and for whom the new house is named.

"Transplant doctors are really just doing their jobs," Barker said. "They're important, but they're just jobs. The patients and their families are the true heroes.

"Most ... transplants now work out well, but for the families of transplant patients, there is still a need for courage," he added.

Much like a Ronald McDonald House, the Barker Penn Transplant House will be a home away from home for transplant patients and their families. The facility can house up to four adults in each of its 12 suites and will have a full-time staff round the clock. For $60 per night, the comforts of home will be made available, including a community kitchen, laundry facilities, a courtyard garden, and Internet access. Small luxuries like an education conference room and fitness center will be available, too.

The number of transplants so far this year at Penn is 103 for all organs, according to United Network for Organ Sharing. Last year, a total of 390 patients received a new organ.

Kevin Mahoney, chief administrative officer of the Penn health system, said the all-volunteer project required $5 million in cash, and in-kind donations from unions, architects, and contractors.

"A hospital doesn't just wake up one day and do this," Mahoney said. Transplant surgeon Abraham Shaked "was really pushing to get this done. He's the heart and soul behind it."

American Society of Transplantation president Robert Gaston was surprised to hear that there was a new...
facility coming on line, let alone two, emphasizing that this kind of resource is rare.

Patients now "are much more responsible for their own out-of-pocket expenses. And that imposes significant challenges for financially at-risk patients," said Gaston, also the medical director of the University of Alabama.

One of the biggest donations was the design and construction of the building by Viñoly, who also designed an extension to Penn's Pearlman Center as well as the Kimmel Center.

"This almost falls into true altruistic service, which I highly applaud," Gaston said.

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