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Renewal aims to find kidney donors

By RITA POLIAKOV, Staff Reporter

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**TORONTO** — When Ari was 17, he wanted to make aliyah to Israel. Then his kidneys started failing.

Renewal Toronto founder John Anhang speaks at an April 29 event, organized by the Chabad organizations in the GTA, that raised awareness of the need for kidney transplants.

“The condition’s called membranous nephropathy,” said Ari, who didn’t want his real name used.

Membranous nephropathy is a kidney disease that causes inflammation of the structures inside of the kidney that help filter waste and fluids.

For Ari, 24, this diagnosis changed more than his immigration plans.

“Everything was on hold in my life. Just how you feel, you feel horrible,” he said. “While the kidneys are failing, you have a lot of side effects. One of them is water retention.”

This meant that, while retaining water, his face looked like someone had punched him, Ari said.

“I couldn’t even recognize myself a lot of days.”

At 21, Ari was put on dialysis, a process of cleaning the blood in which a large machine filters waste and fluids from a person’s body.

“Your blood gets taken out either through your arm or chest. It goes through the machine, filters the blood, takes out excess potassium... it regulates a lot of different things.”

Ari is on dialysis eight hours a day, five days a week.

“Dialysis in itself, waking up in the morning, you feel out of it. You can’t just get out of bed and then just go to work. It takes time to wake up from the machine. It’s very hard on the body,” he said. “What I’m doing in 40 hours a week, you’re doing 24/7... It’s hard on the body.”

If left on dialysis for too long, his heart could become affected, he said.

“A lot of times you can’t stay on dialysis indefinitely. What happens is, your heart could start getting worn out... you can experience heart failure,” he said.

Shortly after being put on dialysis, Ari was placed on the kidney transplant list. It could take up to seven years before he gets a kidney.

Which is where John Anhang comes in.

Anhang is the founder of Toronto’s chapter of Renewal, an organization started in New York that works within the Jewish community to find donors and co-ordinate kidney transplants.

“Dialysis is basically a long-term death sentence,” Anhang said.

This realization, coupled by the fact that Renewal helped his friend in Jerusalem find a kidney donation, led Anhang to start a Renewal chapter in Toronto last November.

“[I thought] certainly there must be people in our community here who are in need of a kidney and there would be people that are generous and kind-hearted enough to consider donating,” he said.

Renewal Toronto, like New York’s Renewal, helps find donors and co-ordinates all the details of the transplant, including any financial issues.

“There aren’t any medical expenses, however, [donors] will incur some expenses,” he said.

These expenses include any lost wages, since donors will be unable to work for two to three weeks, as well as any possible travel and child-care expenses.

“The important thing Renewal Toronto does, we reimburse for all out-of-pocket expenses and any lost wages. If someone is willing to do this wonderful act, we don’t want their financial situation to stand in [their] way,” he said, adding that this is made possible by local donations.

So far, Renewal Toronto is trying to find kidneys for seven people, including Ari.

After its latest event at the end of April, which was organized by the Chabad organizations of the Greater Toronto Area, Anhang has a total of about 30 potential donors, though this won’t necessarily equal to 30 kidneys, he said.

Apart from cultivating donations and donors, Anhang is also trying to raise awareness about kidney disease and the transplant process in the Jewish community.

“Most people are unaware of this issue. Most people think [donating a kidney] is very dangerous,” he said, adding that there are also Jewish misconceptions.

“Some people believe that when a person passes away, they have to be buried intact, they can’t give away an organ.”

According to Anhang, this is a false assumption.

“Kidney donations are fully encouraged in the Jewish tradition and Jewish law... leading rabbis in Toronto have approved of kidney donations,” he said, adding that the only limitations kidney donors will live with is that they won’t be able to play full-contact sports.

While Anhang is starting small, with seven people on his recipient list, he has big goals.

“I want to keep our objectives attainable. At this point, we’re dealing with the Greater Toronto area. I’d like to expand to Ontario, and maybe Canada,” he said. “Our mission, my dream, is that anyone who needs a kidney gets one within six months.”

For more information about Renewal Toronto, visit [www.renewal.org](http://www.renewal.org), e-mail [toronto@renewal.org](mailto:toronto@renewal.org) or call 416-638-7633.

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