

TRANSFORMING KIDNEY CARE IN

RWANDA

A LIFESAVING INITIATIVE



Current Program Update

This year, the program is continuing its efforts at the Rwanda Military Referral & Teaching Hospital, where the team returned for 14 days, starting from Saturday. They began performing surgeries on Monday after conducting consultations over the weekend. These consultations are crucial for assessing patients' conditions and determining their eligibility for fistula creation. Unfortunately, some patients have small veins, making it impossible to create a fistula for them.

INTRODUCTION

In Rwanda, a remarkable program has emerged over the past 14 years, aimed at improving the lives of kidney patients facing difficult conditions across the entire country. Led by Dr. Isabelle Kolb, a nephrologist from the University Hospital of Strasbourg, and supported by Dr. Laura Braun and other specialists, this initiative focuses on providing dialysis through the creation of arteriovenous fistulas—an essential step in enhancing patient care. This year, the program took place at the Rwanda Military Referral & Teaching Hospital, marking a significant step in its ongoing efforts.

Origins and Purpose

The journey began in 2010 when Dr. Kolb, inspired by a Rwandan patient from her practice in Strasbourg, decided to address the dire need for improved dialysis treatments. During a visit to Butare, where her patient received care, she witnessed directly the struggles faced by those reliant on catheters, which often led to infections and complications. With the help of her colleagues, including a vascular surgeon and local surgeons, Dr. Kolb initiated a program to perform fistula surgeries, significantly changing the landscape of nephrology in Rwanda.

Goals and Structure

The primary goal of this program is to ensure that all patients across Rwanda have access to effective kidney treatment, particularly through the establishment of fistulas instead of relying solely on catheters during dialysis. By focusing on creating these fistulas, the initiative reduces complications associated with catheters, thereby improving patients' overall health and quality of life. Each year, the team visits Rwanda to perform surgeries and provide immediate assistance. Since last year, the program has served over 62 patients annually, demonstrating a growing demand for kidney care. While the team does not provide in-depth training in the conventional manner, they aim to empower local healthcare providers by sharing knowledge and techniques during their visits.



Impact on Patients

Patients undergoing dialysis with fistulas report a significantly better quality of life compared to those using catheters. They appreciate the comfort and lower infection rates associated with fistulas, which lead to improved survival rates. However, creating a fistula can be complex, particularly for individuals with hypertension and diabetes, which are common in the region. One significant issue is the lack of follow-up care after the team's visits. The team returns the following year with new patients, receiving feedback through local nephrologists and via email communication about ongoing patient care. Their busy schedules back home can make this communication difficult.



PATIENT TESTIMONIALS

These testimonials are from patients who came on Saturday and Sunday at the Rwanda Military Referral & Teaching Hospital for this program:

1. Elimine Egide: "I came here because of an infection in my chest catheter. After consulting with my doctor, I learned that they could insert a fistula in my arm, as the chest catheter had complications."

2. Alice Umurerwa: "I brought my mother, Olive Uwase, who has been on dialysis for almost nine years. She initially started with a regular catheter, but after experiencing weakness and swelling, we sought a fistula. Unfortunately, the fistula placed two years ago never worked. We returned to see the doctors, who were very hospitable and decided it was best for her to continue using the catheter for her comfort and well-being."



3. Anonymous Patient: "I came to the hospital for a fistula to start with. The doctor we met with examined me and said that they would probably call me to do a fistula in my arm. I've been on dialysis and using a catheter for a year and three months. They will remove the catheter and insert the fistula."

Conclusion

The efforts led by Dr. Kolb, alongside Dr. Laura Braun and other specialists, as well as local medical teams at the Rwanda Military Referral & Teaching Hospital, are making a significant impact on kidney care across Rwanda. As the country's healthcare infrastructure and technologies continue to develop, there is hope that more patients will gain access to life-saving treatments. This initiative not only addresses immediate medical needs but also aims to advance long-term sustainability in kidney care, ensuring that there is support and necessary resources for better health outcomes.