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Search ends with transplant for man

MARCEL HONORÉ • THE DESERT SUN

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La Quinta resident Richard Butler was in bad shape - "days from dying," his wife said.

A 66-year-old father of two daughters and two stepdaughters, this former city planning commissioner and Rotarian, was suffering from cirrhosis of the liver.

Butler's deteriorating condition meant he would eventually need a transplant. And, in June, that's what doctors told him. On June 21, he collapsed.

Butler's wife, Marty, took him to Eisenhower Medical Center, which does not have a transplant center. She said doctors told her Butler was in the end stages of liver disease and nothing could be done to save her husband.

After five days there, Marty said she took the initiative and had him transferred to Loma Linda University Medical Center, where doctors told her Butler was too ill - and too risky - for a transplant.

Neither hospital would comment specifically on Butler's case due to doctor-patient confidentiality.

A staff member at Loma Linda, however, put the Butlers in touch with Dr. Richard Darling, a dentist who's also president of the FAIR Foundation, which helps transplant patients.

"He immediately told me: 'There's a little secret out there for getting an organ,'" Marty said.

What Darling did was refer the Butlers to Dr. Donald Hillebrand, medical director of Liver Transplant at Scripps Green Hospital near San Diego.

Butler was soon cleared for a new liver on July 11 and received it on July 15.

While the first month is delicate, he's doing well and should recover, Marty Butler said. The switch to San Diego, both Marty and Darling said, saved Richard Butler's life.

Darling, a former transplant patient himself, said transplant hospitals in more crowded regions have to compete with more patients for available organs, making those on their lists wait longer.

"We do have a lot of demand here," said Stephanie Schmitz, a spokesperson for OneLegacy, a transplant center serving several counties, including Riverside. "When you look at the population, it's huge."

Darling chooses his words carefully.

He doesn't want to upset local doctors, but he's also "distressed at the large number of patients in our group who were told by valley physicians that death was inevitable with no possibility of a transplant."

in your voice

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