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## Longtime Healer Needs Transplant

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For more than 30 years, Michael Harris has dealt with death every day. As chief of pediatric oncology at Hackensack University Medical Center in New Jersey, he treats countless children who have cancer and blood disorders. But now Harris, 61, who lives in Englewood, has to save his own life. In 1986, he accidentally pricked himself with a needle he had just used to draw blood from a patient -- he became infected with hepatitis C, a virus that attacks the liver. For almost two decades, Harris kept his illness a secret, outside of a small circle of family and friends. The hospital hired him, knowing he had the disease, and for most of the time, with few symptoms, he was able to do his job. But the acceleration of the disease and his dire need for a liver transplant has forced him to go public. "I didn't want to be viewed by patients as someone with problems. That's not my job," he said. "My job is to help them, and many of them have more serious problems than I have, even at this point in my life."



Harris, who also serves as director of the Hackensack-based Tomorrow's Children's Institute for Cancer and Blood Disorders, said he doesn't want to burden anyone with his condition. "As long as he could, my husband wanted to be able to work," said Frieda Harris, his wife of 36 years.

But after years of putting in 20-hour work days for his patients while also being a dad to his four children and an active member in the Jewish community, hepatitis C has caught up. Since last February, he's been hospitalized twice. He's lost almost 20 pounds. He says he constantly feels nauseous and drained of energy.

"He's had such a complete physical change in the last year," said Cindy Steele, associate director of the children's institute, which Harris helped found. "It's been very sad and hard. He doesn't have the same energy to do everything he wants to do."

"[People] saw me really dragging," Harris said. "Functioning, but really dragging."

Steele, who has known Harris since 1984 and was one of the first to find out about his illness, said it was a struggle for Harris to go public with his condition. She said she reminded him that people loved him, and for those who didn't understand why Harris had suddenly changed from the energetic man they always knew, it was better to come out. Better than to let rumor and speculation grow.

Harris said the help he's received from colleagues, family, and his rabbi has been a great comfort, including community

members volunteering to drive him to work each day. Most important is the effort being made to find him a new liver through a directed organ donation.

Rabbi Shmuel Goldin of Congregation Ahavath Torah in Englewood, where Harris is a member, said there has been "a tremendous outpouring to help" and a "frustration at the inability to do more." Harris' name recently went on the New York donor list, but with nearly 18,000 patients waiting for new livers, getting a transplant through the list could take years. To get the word out, Harris' story has also recently appeared on "The Today Show" and 1010WINS radio. "Frankly, I don't think it's going to get us what we need," Frieda Harris said, "but it's going to help the population in general, because it raises organ donor awareness."

Rabbi Goldin said he also thinks Harris's situation will help specifically raise awareness within the Jewish community. "More and more within the Orthodox community there is a realization that Jewish law does not forbid organ donation as long as it's going to save someone else's life," Rabbi Goldin said.

Harris, who said he is most upset that he has had to stop seeing patients, is optimistic a liver will come his way. But after years of saving children's lives, it is a surreal feeling, he said, to know he must wait for a young person to die to save his own. He recalled a conversation with a 14-year-old patient from Israel, Naomi Cohain, who needed a bone marrow transplant. In her last hours, she asked Harris if there was any organ she could donate after her death.

When he told her she could give her corneas, "she said, 'it gives me great pleasure to know someone will see the beauty of this world through my eyes'," Harris noted, adding: "You really don't wait for the death of somebody, but if a death occurs, there should be something good that comes out of it, if possible."

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