

Black patients waited longer to get kidney transplants

Race-based coefficient forced many to waitlist

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In 2010, Dexter Welch, a car salesman in Nashville, was diagnosed with kidney disease. By 2018, he began dialysis for kidney failure and was added to the nationwide United Network for Organ Sharing waitlist for a transplant.

Welch is Black. If he were white, he would have been added to the waitlist years before – in 2011.

That's because an estimate previously used to assess kidney health, called the eGFR measurement, assumed Black patients were 16% healthier than patients of other races.

The use of that race-based coefficient meant Black patients had to wait longer to be put on the list for a transplant – even though Black people are two to four times more likely to suffer kidney failure than white people.

The assumption that Black patients were stronger had no scientific basis, according to researchers.

Yet it was used for decades until finally being abandoned in 2022.

Many diagnostics underestimate Black patients' risk

Other diagnostic algorithms also “correct,” or alter, their scores for Black patients. They include those used to calculate heart health, the likelihood of kidney stones, a child's risk of a urinary tract infection and whether an expectant mother should have a cesarean section.

“Some algorithm developers offer no explanation of why race or ethnic differences might exist. Others offer rationales but, when these are traced to their origins, they lead to outdated, suspect racial science or to biased data,” researchers from Harvard University and NYU Langone Medical Center wrote in a 2020 article in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

Scientists have found more genetic



Drs. Charles Mouch and Tyler Murphy perform a living donor kidney transplant in 2023 at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, Tenn. ERIN O. SMITH/VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY MEDICAL CENTER

variation within racial groups than between different races, the article notes. And when Black people as a group do have different health outcomes, the cause is most likely societal, such as economic disparities or the stress of enduring racism.

In 2022, the United Network for Organ Sharing banned the use of any diagnostic tool for kidney health that uses race. A year later, the organization required hospitals to retroactively adjust the priority of Black patients on the kidney transplant waitlist.

That help came too late for Welch. The years of dialysis led to heart disease. In 2023, Welch had two stents implanted. Vanderbilt University Medical Center, which is treating Welch, said he is now too sick to receive a kidney transplant.

In April, Welch sued Vanderbilt University Medical Center and the United Network for Organ Sharing. A few weeks later, he suffered a heart attack. The hospital declined to comment on the lawsuit. Other Black patients denied kidney transplants have filed suits in Atlanta and Los Angeles.

“There's a very real chance that he's going to die as a result of this application of the race-based coefficient,” said his attorney Matthew Venezia.

Learn more about becoming an organ donor at bethegifttoday.com.