Trauma team respects wishes to forego blood transfusions

Blood conservation techniques help accommodate trauma patients’ religious beliefs

What do you do when doctors insist your son will die without a blood transfusion – which violates his religious beliefs and severs you from your spiritual community?

Art and Liz Still, Jehovah’s Witnesses from Liberty, Mo., turned to The University of Kansas Hospital, the region’s only nationally verified Level I Trauma Center. Using the latest blood conservation practices, the trauma team can perform lifesaving procedures to accommodate the wishes of patients who refuse blood transfusions.

In September 2010, Luka Still, then 22, suffered massive injuries in a high-speed motorcycle crash. He had severe traumatic brain injuries, countless broken bones and damage to internal organs. Doctors at an area hospital told Luka’s parents he needed a blood transfusion to survive. Their religion rejects the procedure.

A retired Kansas City Chiefs defensive end, Art thought he could take a crushing blow. But nothing prepared him for the weighty decision before them. He and Liz refused the transfusion and began seeking alternatives.

Blood management expert

“Elora Thorpe was the real catalyst in our decision to transfer Luka,” Art said. “She’s a national authority on blood conservation and has been very helpful to our religious community.” Thorpe, an RN, is the hospital’s transfusion safety nurse manager. Two days after the accident, Luka arrived at the trauma center clinging to life, dangerously anemic from blood loss.

“He was as close to brain dead as he could possibly be,” said Michael Moncure, MD, Trauma and Critical Care director. “But it’s not our job to try to convince patients or families to go against personal beliefs. We develop a strategy to support their wishes.”

Initiative improves outcomes

The trauma team had adopted blood conservation practices months earlier when the hospital launched the state’s first blood management initiative. Collaborating closely with neurosurgeon Jules Nazzaro, MD, orthopedic surgeons and other specialists, the team mapped out a coordinated approach to address Luka’s complex injuries. They delayed surgery for about two weeks to rebuild his blood supply and improve his condition.

For five weeks, Luka remained unconscious in intensive care. His family – he is the fifth of 11 children – showered him with love. After he awakened and left ICU, he spent another month on a recovery unit.

“The whole team was just wonderful,” Liz said. “Not only doctors and nurses, but everyone we had contact with. And no one ever mentioned a blood transfusion.”

Saving blood saves lives

In 2010, The University of Kansas Hospital launched the state’s first blood management initiative. Research indicates patient outcomes improve when blood products are used only when absolutely necessary.

Results over four years:

• Reduced patient exposure to blood products by 58 percent (adjusted for hospital’s increase in patient volume and in severity of conditions treated)
• Reduced complications and lengths of stay
• Saved patients more than $12 million

To learn more, visit kumed.edu/SavingBlood.

As Jehovah’s Witnesses, Art and Liz Still and son Luka reject blood transfusions on religious grounds. The trauma team at The University of Kansas Hospital used blood conservation practices to save Luka’s life without a blood transfusion when he was critically injured in a motorcycle accident in 2010.

Progress measured in years

With severe traumatic brain injuries, progress is measured in years. Within six months, Luka began remembering who he was and recognized his parents. Through continued physical and speech therapy, exercise, a careful diet and determination, he has become increasingly self-sufficient. He lives with his family and takes care of himself. He walks slowly with a cane, makes witty conversation and structures his time in online research, reading and listening to music.

“I’m really thankful for everything the hospital did for me and for my family,” Luka said.
Whenever a national leader visits Kansas City, The University of Kansas Hospital’s Trauma and Critical Care director Michael Moncure, MD, is consulted well in advance.

As the region’s only nationally verified Level I Trauma Center, the hospital often goes on standby when top-level elected officials and government dignitaries make stops throughout the metro area. The hospital is also the official injury treatment and healthcare provider for Kansas Speedway, the Kansas City Royals and the Kansas City Chiefs.

The trauma center treated and cared for a record 2,163 patients in 2013 – 1,761 for trauma and 402 for burns. The hospital’s Gene and Barbara Burnett Burn Center is the region’s only adult and pediatric burn care facility accredited by the American Burn Association.

“The top national verification puts our trauma program among the best in the country,” Moncure said. “We are prepared around the clock to handle the full range of trauma incidents – everything from multi-vehicle traffic accidents to violent crimes to mass casualty emergencies such as explosions and natural disasters.”

Highest standard of care

Specifically, the Level I distinction recognizes the trauma center’s ability to provide the highest possible standard of care for the most severely injured patients and those with complex, multisystem injuries. The program is the region’s largest; the trauma center treats nearly twice as many patients each year as the next largest facility.

The multidisciplinary trauma team’s 38 physician specialists include trauma surgeons, emergency medicine physicians, neurosurgeons, orthopedic traumatologists and orthopedists, plastic surgeons, radiologists, pediatric critical care specialists and others. Trauma nurses, therapists, nutritionists, neuropsychologists, case managers, care coordinators and others round out the team.

Learn more at kumed.edu/trauma.

Level I Trauma Center team members (from left) Alexis Johnson, RN; Travis Pollema, DO; Tammy Murray, RN; and Jeanette Addington, RN, are among staff who respond to more than 1,700 traumas each year at The University of Kansas Hospital.