THE CATALYST

The Secret Life of Kidneys: What you don’t know can hurt you

MHCC & Series –Kidney Foundation of Canada By Sandra Koppert, Director of Mental Health Advancement, MHCC Welcome to the eighth installment in the MHCC & series, designed to get to know our HealthPartners membership, and discover how we can best support one another. To mark Kidney Health Month, I sat down with Elizabeth Myles, National...

By: Sandra Koppert | Posted: March 24, 2025

Welcome to the eighth installment in the MHCC *& series, designed to get to know our HealthPartners membership, and discover how we can best support one another.*

To mark Kidney Health Month, I sat down with Elizabeth Myles, National Executive Director of The Kidney Foundation of Canada, to learn about the organization’s remarkable journey and the critical connection between kidney disease and mental health.

Silent workhorses: Understanding our kidneys

Core childhood memories stay with us well into adulthood. Often they inform our outlook, even if we don’t realize it. That was the case for me when I was asked to choose a HealthPartners charity to learn more about. I picked The Kidney Foundation of Canada without hesitation.

Of course, it only took a moment of reflection to figure out why.

Many years ago, my best friend’s father was very sick. I remember playing with her in the backseat of the car, almost weekly, as we drove with her mom to collect him from the hospital.

I knew little about his condition, just that he was having a medical treatment to clean his blood, something invisible and automatic that I’d never given any thought to. I understood his kidneys needed help to work, but I couldn’t grasp why he wasn’t getting well. The seriousness of his chronic illness only hit home after he died. Kidney disease took my best friend’s dad, and left us both with more questions than answers.

My conversation with Elizabeth was an opportunity to fill in the blanks left empty all those years ago.

During our discussion, I was struck by how little most of us know about these vital organs. Our kidneys are the body’s filtration system. They remove waste and excess fluid from our blood to create urine; regulate our blood pressure; produce hormones that help make red blood cells; and activate vitamin D for healthy bones.

For our kidneys, it’s all in a day’s work.

“Most Canadians don’t spend much time thinking about their kidneys,” Elizabeth explains, referring to a recent poll conducted by The Kidney Foundation. “Yet these fist-sized organs process about 200 liters of blood each day. They’re truly the unsung heroes of our body.”



Elizabeth Myles, National Executive Director, Kidney Foundation of Canada

Six decades of progress: From certain death to hopeful possibilities

The Kidney Foundation celebrated its 60th anniversary last year, prompting me to ask Elizabeth about the good news stories in kidney health over these last six decades.

It turns out there’s plenty to celebrate. Back in 1964, kidney disease was essentially a death sentence. Dialysis was for acute treatment – not life-sustaining as it is today. Transplant science was in its infancy.

Fast-forward to 2025 and we’re seeing rays of light in a once a very dark space. At-home dialysis is a reality. A transplanted kidney can function for 20 years or more, enabling recipients to thrive not just survive. Anti-rejection medicines are growing in availability and sophistication, and new treatments include powerful drugs that can slow, and even reverse damage.

“It’s an exciting time to be doing this work,” Elizabeth says with genuine enthusiasm. “We’ve come so far, and there’s real hope on the horizon.”

The physical and emotional burden of kidney disease

But the flip side of medical progress is the many challenges that remain. It’s these that will be the focus of The Kidney Foundation’s next chapter.

Kidney disease is sneaky, offering little in the way of physical symptoms until it’s advanced. “Imagine going to hospital and learning that you’re direly unwell overnight,” says Elizabeth, emphasizing that a diagnosis this serious isn’t just about the physical reality, but also about the

mental health and financial implications.

While more options are available today, dialysis is still a significant burden for those who need it. In-centre dialysis is typically three four-hour sessions each week. Not only is it time-consuming, but it's also invasive and disruptive. Beyond this, it causes emotional distress, especially when, for most people, the diagnosis itself comes as a complete shock.

"Suddenly you're faced with the harsh reality of your own mortality, dependent on a dialysis machine, and shouldering the mental load of a now uncertain future. This often brings on feelings of anxiety, depression, and deep grief for the life you once envisioned."

To add insult to injury, the financial burden can also be overwhelming. "We're seeing people diagnosed younger and younger, many in their prime earning years," Elizabeth notes. "Between time away from work for treatment, medication costs, and transportation expenses, kidney disease can devastate a family's financial stability."

Finding community: The power of peer support

That's where The Kidney Foundation's peer support network becomes not just a source of comfort and information, but a veritable lifeline.

In recognition that one-size-doesn't-fit-all, the organization has three different kinds on offer: one-on-one, online private forums, and virtual peer-support groups, because everyone who is diagnosed may process the news differently.

"We offer more than 200 different support groups," Elizabeth explains, "catering to the diverse needs of those seeking support — from individuals at various stages of illness to caregivers and parents."

The value of peer support is something I've seen firsthand working in the mental health space. Connecting with others who share our experiences can normalize our challenges and give us practical wisdom above and beyond clinical advice.

"There is immense reassurance in seeing others coping well," Elizabeth adds. "It transforms the narrative from 'my life is over' to 'I can still live meaningfully with this condition.'"

The gift of life: Transplantation and organ donation

While innovative medications are now available, with more under development, a kidney transplant remains the gold-standard for successful outcomes. But demand far outstrips supply.

"Did you know that 71 percent of Canadians waiting for an organ transplant are waiting for a kidney?" Elizabeth asks. "That's thousands of people whose lives are on hold, sometimes for years, hoping for a call that might not come in time."

Elizabeth and her team are working to create favorable conditions that support living donors – both emotionally and financially. They are advocating for changes, such as paid leave from work during recovery, to make altruism less costly for those inclined to give.

"Organ donation is the greatest gift someone can receive," says Elizabeth, "and most Canadians support it, but sometimes, life gets in the way of people taking the step to formalize their wishes [to be a posthumous donor]. We've worked to create avenues that make that choice front-and-

center. For example, in British Columbia, Ontario and Nunavut, it's now possible to indicate your intentions on your income tax form."

Given that the only two certainties in life are death and taxes, I couldn't help but marvel at the brilliance of something so simple. In fact, the number of organ donors jumped by 2.5 million following this change.

"It just reinforces that Canadians are some of the most altruistic people in the world. The gift of life shouldn't incur a financial cost for donors, nor should it be difficult to register your wishes in advance," says Elizabeth.

Legacy of compassion: The Logan Boulet effect

Perhaps no single person has had a greater influence on inspiring organ donation in Canada than Logan Boulet, a young hockey player who was tragically killed in the 2018 Humboldt Broncos bus crash.

"Logan had registered as an organ donor just weeks before the accident," Elizabeth tells me with visible emotion. "He lost his life in the crash, but he saved six others. His selfless choice inspired what we now call the 'Logan Boulet Effect' – tens of thousands of Canadians registering as organ donors in the weeks following his story becoming public."

His legacy continues to shine brightly, with April 7th designated as Green Shirt Day, a testament to how one person's compassion can change the trajectory of countless lives.

"Those six recipients and their families will carry Logan's gift with them – and keep his memory alive," says Elizabeth. "Until we find a cure, transplants are the best hope we have to treat kidney disease – but we can't ignore the power of prevention."

Prevention: The best medicine

While The Kidney Foundation strives to help those living with kidney disease today, it's also working to prevent more people from needing lifesaving treatments in the first place.

Given the silent nature of the illness, Elizabeth and her team are pushing to have kidney function testing done at the primary care level, especially for those who have known risk factors, which can include genetics, diabetes, high blood pressure and certain medications.

"Simple blood and urine tests as part of routine health check-ups could do absolute wonders in catching and treating kidney malfunction early," says Elizabeth. "Early intervention can dramatically slow or halt progression of the disease. We'd like to see testing for kidney problems become as common as breast cancer screening."

In fact, shining a spotlight on kidney health is the Kidney Foundation's goal for Kidney Health Month, because greater awareness and education can make a significant difference in enriching the quality of lives – and ultimately saving them.

"We want people in Canada to know their risk factors and to ask their healthcare providers about kidney function tests," Elizabeth emphasizes. "Everyone should feel empowered to advocate for their own health."

And the stakes couldn't be higher. Current estimates indicate that over 4 million Canadians may have, or be at risk of, chronic kidney disease – without having the slightest clue.

The inseparable connection: Mental wellness and kidney health

As we wrap up our conversation, I share with Elizabeth how my work leading a collaborative on mental health and chronic disease at MHCC has shaped my understanding of the kidney health journey.

I also highlight that during our extensive conversations with HealthPartners, we're hearing that people living with chronic disease, who also have adequate mental health support, will stick to their treatment more readily, enjoy stronger social connections, and often show improved physical outcomes.

"From our perspective at the MHCC, it isn't an either or. It's an 'and'" I say.

Elizabeth nods emphatically. "We see it every day. When someone feels hopeless or overwhelmed, it can affect everything from medication adherence to their willingness to consider transplantation. That's why we're increasingly focused on the whole person, not just their kidneys."

Looking ahead: A vision for the next sixty years

With 60 years under its belt, The Kidney Foundation has a strong foundation on which to build its future work.

"Our vision is unwavering – we are determined to see a future free of kidney failure, where kidney disease is prevented through early diagnosis and treatment, and where patients are well-supported throughout their journey," she says. "We've made incredible strides, but we won't stop until kidney disease no longer shortens or diminishes lives."

It's an ambitious goal, but after our conversation, I'm convinced The Kidney Foundation has the passion, expertise, and community to make it happen.

That little girl who once played in the backseat with her friend now understands she was a support and distraction from the complex reality of kidney disease. A disease that requires those who face it, and their families, to draw on remarkable resilience – a resiliency I still admire in my best friend, to this day.

Most importantly, I understand that supporting kidney health means supporting the whole person, mind and body together.

To learn more about kidney health, find support, or discover how you can help, visit www.kidney.ca.

This MHCC *& conversation is dedicated to Allan. You live on in our memories.*

Author: *Sandra Koppert*, *Director of Mental Health Advancement, MHCC*

Sandra has extensive experience in strategic planning, outreach and promotion, and stakeholder relations within the national non-profit health sector and research consulting. Under her

leadership, the MHCC championed the development, release, and ongoing promotion and uptake of the National Standard of Canada for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students. Sandra also oversees a range of other initiatives related to the justice system and the Schizophrenia Quality Standard(s).

Mental Health Commission of Canada
https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/
350 Albert Street, Suite 1210 Ottawa ON K1R 1A4
Tel: 613.683.3755 | Fax: 613.798.2989
mhccinfo@mentalhealthcommission.ca