

# Dialysis: Extending Life's Possibilities

*by Dr. Joseph Bonventre, President, American Society of Nephrology*

News reports often describe kidney dialysis as “difficult,” “exhausting,” and “complicated.”

What they fail to mention is that dialysis is also miraculous. A life-saver. And a life-extender.

Just ask Shad Ireland, a young man who has had kidney disease since 1983. At one point, after a failed kidney transplant, Shad was told he would likely die soon. Shad had other plans, however. Inspired one day by watching an athlete finish the grueling Ironman Triathlon, Shad rallied himself off the couch and started exercising. He went on to become the first dialysis patient to complete the Ironman, in 2004.

He now lives the life of a professional athlete, even though he’s been on kidney dialysis for nearly three decades.

As Shad says in a new podcast interview with ASN President-Elect Ronald Faulk, MD, “we need to change the face of kidney disease.” I couldn’t agree more.

Let’s start by taking a look at dialysis, and some common perceptions about it.

As Shad and I both know all too well, kidney disease is surprisingly common. Right now, about one of every nine Americans has some form of kidney disease. Every year, about 100,000 people in the U.S. develop complete kidney failure. When that happens, they have about a week to live if they don’t start dialysis or get a kidney transplant.

Does dialysis work as smoothly as nature? No. Dialysis typically filters blood for four hours three times a week, while healthy kidneys work continuously to filter waste out of the blood, control blood pressure and maintain the blood’s normal composition. People on dialysis must follow strict care regimens and monitor their health closely. It can be a difficult road to follow, especially for those who also have other chronic health conditions. But it’s one that many people choose. Indeed, right now about half a million Americans are on dialysis, including Shad.

For many, dialysis is a temporary measure – a potential avenue to a kidney transplant and a life without dialysis. Back in 1954, dialysis kept Richard Herrick alive long enough to receive the world’s first successful organ transplant. He received a kidney from his (living) identical twin and gained eight more years of life. He went on to marry a nurse he met in the hospital and have a family with her. Richard Herrick’s landmark surgery led to thousands of kidney transplants, to thousands of lives full of new possibilities. More than 300,000 kidney transplants have been done in the U.S. since then.

Patients typically wait three to five years for a kidney transplant. Most of the 88,087 candidates in the United States now waiting for a kidney transplant are undergoing dialysis. Without it, they certainly would never survive the wait. They would never have the chance to explore new possibilities.

Some medical professionals have said that doctors should not encourage their older patients, who may have other serious medical conditions, to embark on dialysis. But using age as a determining factor in whether to offer dialysis does not reflect the needs of our population or appropriate medical care; young and old alike can benefit from dialysis. And our population is aging; the number of people over 65 has increased dramatically and is expected to more than double by 2050. As all of us who care for patients know, the health of any individual is not determined by their chronological age alone. In fact, due to better care for individuals of all ages, the percentage of patients over 65

who develop completely failed kidneys has been falling.

To try to impose one-size-fits-all solutions on such important healthcare decisions is to treat patients and their families with less respect than they deserve.

Yes, we need to be honest with our patients about what dialysis entails. Dialysis can be difficult. But it can also be miraculous. Who would have thought that Shad Ireland, once near death and weighing 75 pounds, would go on to fulfill his dream of completing a triathlon?

Every American deserves a chance to extend life's possibilities, and to work on fulfilling their own dreams, whatever they might be.

I hope you'll take a few minutes to listen to the interview with Shad, and hear how dialysis has allowed him to not just survive, but to thrive.

As Shad says, we need to change the face of kidney disease. With the launch of this blog, as well as our other social media outlets, such as our [Facebook](#) page, we hope to do just that. Let's get the conversations about kidney disease out there, and change public perceptions about dialysis and other treatments. Let's also focus on helping people to understand how kidney disease is so closely related to the rising healthcare epidemics of obesity, diabetes and high blood pressure.

Whether you are a physician, medical student, healthcare worker, kidney patient, caregiver, or concerned family member, you can help. Take a moment to "like" us on [Facebook](#), follow us on [Twitter](#), and follow our [blog](#) as we talk more about these issues. Ask your friends and relatives to follow along as well.

Let's get the conversation going.

*The interview with Shad Ireland can also be downloaded from the [ASN Kidney News podcast page](#).*