

HEALTH

Precious Days

After 22 years on kidney dialysis, Patsy Webb knows that every day is precious.

BY MELANIE LeMAY

Twenty-two years ago, with her life hanging in the balance, Patsy Webb turned to medical technology for a reprieve.

Webb's kidneys, which would normally have filtered waste products from her bloodstream, had been irreparably damaged by repeated infections. Toxins were building up in her body. She grew too weak to climb steps—then too weak even to sit up in a chair.

If Patsy Webb gets depressed about her long-term illness, husband Herb snaps her out of it.



Her longtime physician and family friend William Gaba watched helplessly as Webb's condition deteriorated. By 1966, he knew she had less than a year to live. Then Dr. Gaba heard about a research project at the University of Alabama at

Birmingham to test a newly-developed artificial kidney. Through a process called hemodialysis, the machine could remove a patient's blood, pass it through a filter to remove body waste products and excess fluid, and pump the cleansed blood back into the body.

Only 15 patients would be accepted to test these machines, the first in Alabama. A committee of doctors at UAB screened the applicants. "They virtually decided who would live or die," Webb says now. "There was no other treatment for the condition. In that first dialysis project, there was space for only 15 patients and the ones chosen had to be relatively young with no other major health problems. The doctors were looking for people who could be rehabilitated, and I fit the category."

In the early years dialysis treatment lasted 14 hours. Twice each week, Webb drove the 80 miles to UAB from her hometown of Winfield and spent the night connected to the artificial kidney. Today's more sophisticated machines require a third trip each week, but pump her entire blood volume out and into her body 10 times in only three hours.

Does it hurt? "When I'm connected to the machine, there's no discomfort, although I sometimes feel weak," Webb says. "And sometimes my blood pressure drops during treatment and they have to inject medicines into the blood to boost the pressure."

Webb's blood pressure may also drop when she is not connected to the machine, making her dizzy and weak. "In all these years, I've come to know my body pretty well. I just plan my activities around those times when I know I'll be feeling good. I usually feel best on the day after dialysis, before the toxins and excess fluid build up in my body again. On those days, I work at our laundry and dry cleaning business in Winfield—or go to my canasta club or shopping or on a day trip somewhere."

Most importantly, medicine's 22-year gift of life has given Webb precious time with her family. She's watched her daughter Debbie grow up, graduate with a master's degree in education, marry and bring three healthy children into the world. "I want to see my grandchildren grow up," she says. "And that's something that keeps me going. I spend as much time with them as I can, and if I don't feel good enough to babysit, Herb (her husband) sees after them."

Patsy and Herb Webb have been married for 38 years, "and in all that time," she says, "I've never once heard him complain about the demands of this illness. I don't usually get depressed, but if I ever do, it's Herb who snaps me out of it."

Because she has had strong family support, Webb has sought out and encouraged other patients who aren't so fortunate. Often her very presence is enough to comfort a discouraged new dialysis patient. "When patients first learn they have kidney disease, they immediately think in terms of a short life expectancy," Webb says. "Just seeing

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somebody like me, a veteran of dialysis for 22 years, gives them hope."

One of Patsy Webb's pet projects is the Alabama chapter of the American Association of Kidney Patients. As its president she has promoted morale-boosting Christmas parties, summer camps for children and easier transportation for dialysis patients.

"Patsy has been a shining light for our kidney patients," says Peggy Balliet, executive director of the Alabama Kidney Foundation. "She's proven you can have a quality life even when you're dependent on a machine. Sometimes, patients are afraid to plan for the future. With attitudes like Patsy's and continuous advances in technology—better dialysis machines and kidney transplants—the future is looking brighter every day."

The Alabama Kidney Foundation recently inaugurated a scholarship fund for young kidney patients. Since Webb is a pioneer in dialysis at UAB, and since she has contributed so much to other victims of kidney disease, the foundation has named the scholarship in her honor.

Starting in the fall of 1989, the Kidney Foundation—with Webb's input—will award the \$2,000 Patsy Webb Scholarship to an aspiring college student. The recipient will be someone affected by kidney disease who has been treated either by dialysis or transplant.

This fall the Kidney Foundation will award the Patsy Webb Scholarship to a student with kidney disease.

It's fitting that the scholarship, which by its very nature exemplifies hope, be named for a woman who defied medical odds to become one of the longest surviving dialysis patients in the country. With every trip to the dialysis machine at UAB, Webb renews her commitment to life and improves the odds on life expectancy for other dialysis patients.

"Patsy Webb has the most incredible will to live," Peggy Balliet says. "I think she's the kind of person we'd all like to be."

Webb shrugs off the praise. "The fact is I'm just stubborn," she laughs. "I don't want to miss anything. I want to see it all—do it all. And I've found out something everybody doesn't get a chance to learn. Every day is precious." **B**