



Steve (left) and Larry Kowalski.

THE SAN LUIS OBISPO TRIBUNE

**A KIDNEY FROM THE HEART
LARRY KOWALSKI OF MO'S SMOKEHOUSE BBQ GOT A NEW
ORGAN FROM HIS BROTHER IN A RARE PROCEDURE THAT WAS SO
SUCCESSFUL HE DOESN'T NEED TO TAKE MEDICATIONS**

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Larry Kowalski believes in working hard, playing hard and taking risks when the stakes are high.

Kowalski, 49, was born with only one kidney. For most of his life, the founder of Mo's Smokehouse BBQ forgot about it and "was always gogo- go all the time," his oldest brother said.

After opening his first restaurant in downtown San Luis Obispo in 1977 at age 19, Kowalski eventually opened three more in the state.

That same entrepreneurial streak guided him two years ago when doctors said he needed a kidney transplant and asked him to participate in an experimental procedure. He said yes.

Kowalski learned his kidney was failing in 2004, a month after his youngest son was born. He quickly learned that he would need a transplant or dialysis, a process that takes over the kidney's job of filtering the bloodstream.

Kowalski, a former bodybuilder and construction worker, dreaded dialysis that would take three hours, three times a week, and leave him exhausted.

He hoped for a transplant, but even that carried great risks and a lifetime regimen of expensive medications that would likely shorten his life.

"I realized then that my health was everything," he said.

Kowalski went to the kidney transplant program at Stanford University Medical Center. His four brothers offered him a kidney, and his oldest brother proved to be a match.

Kowalski still has the voicemail message on his cell phone when his brother called to say he was a match -- and not just any match but a perfect match.

Ideal candidates

The two Kowalski brothers planned to go forward with a standard kidney donation and transplant, but their perfect match shifted the game plan.

A perfect match means six out of six cell proteins matched. Normally, following a transplant, patients must take medications for the rest of their lives to prevent the body's immune system from attacking the new kidney.

Almost all of the nearly 400,000 people who have undergone an organ transplant since 1988 have had to take such medications.

Stanford doctors are developing a protocol called "tolerance induction" that essentially tricks the transplanted kidney into thinking it's in the same body.

Perfect match patients are ideal candidates, and Stanford doctors asked the Kowalski brothers to volunteer.

What they do is harvest blood cells from the donor and give them to the recipient in addition to the kidney. The hope is that the recipient's body will accept and continue

making the new cells that recognize the kidney, thus eliminating the need for antirejection medications.

Six patients had undergone the protocol, but although their transplants were all successful, none was able to stop taking medications. The doctors had refined their procedure just in time for the Kowalskis.

The tolerance induction transplant is riskier than a normal transplant, but the advantages of living medication-free are immense, said Dr. John Scandling, the medical director of the adult kidney transplant program.

The Kowalski brothers believed the potential benefits far outweighed the added risk, especially given Larry's personality.

"He's the type of person who would be a very bad candidate for dialysis or medications that would restrict his lifestyle," Steve Kowalski said of his brother.

The week before the transplant in February 2005, Larry Kowalski took his older children, ages 22 and 20, helicopter snowboarding in the Colorado backcountry.

Medication-free

The transplant went smoothly, and the next day, he took 60 anti-rejection pills. Doctors weaned him off the medications completely within six months, and now, two years and two months after the transplant, he is medication-free.

"The result is miraculous and wonderful," Steve Kowalski said.

Stanford physicians have now tried the tolerance induction transplant on nine patients. Though all the transplants are successful, Kowalski is the only one living medication-free. Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston is doing something similar and has had a couple of medication-free successes, Scandling said.

"If we're able to repeat it, and we're able to expand this protocol to include cases of less well-matched transplant patients, it could have a significant impact," Scandling said.

The doctors are not sure why it worked in Kowalski and not the other patients. Scandling had one nonscientific theory.

"I think it's because of his personality," he said. "He won't take no for an answer."

Kowalski reopened Mo's last week in a new downtown location, and business has never been better, he said. Sipping a sweet tea in the new restaurant, he said his transplant success is partly why he reopened and expanded the restaurant and is considering expanding more.

"I feel like the luckiest guy in the world," he said.

If he were taking a dozen pills every day, he doubts he would have the energy to put in his current 12-hour days.

He still wears a metal bracelet that says he is taking immunosuppressant drugs. He doesn't want to "jinx" his success by taking it off.

Caption: (1) by TRIBUNE PHOTO BY JOE JOHNSTON - Larry Kowalski, owner of Mo's Smokehouse BBQ, makes a salad at Mo's new location on Monterey Street in San Luis Obispo this week. He is able to work long hours after his successful kidney transplant of two years ago.

(2) by COURTESY PHOTO - Steve Kowalski, left, and brother Larry are honored as 'ball dudes' on Organ Appreciation Night at a San Francisco Giants game last year.