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[<< Back to Article](#)

Dec. 3, 1967: Patient Dies, but First Heart Transplant a Success

By Tony Long 12.03.07 | 12:00 AM



Surgeon Christian Barnard shows an X-ray image of Louis Washkansky's chest taken during the first heart transplant.

Photo: Bettman / Corbis

1967: The first human-to-human heart transplant is performed. The operation is a success, but the patient dies after complications set in.

South African surgeon [Christiaan Barnard](#), who prepared for this day by performing a number of experimental heart transplants involving dogs, led a 30-member surgical team in implanting the heart of a young woman into 53-year-old Louis Washkansky, a Cape Town grocer suffering from diabetes and incurable heart disease.

Washkansky received the heart of Denise Darvall, a 25-year-old bank clerk who was left brain-dead following an automobile accident the day before. She was removed from life support, and her father gave permission for her heart to be given to Washkansky.

The transplant, performed at Cape Town's [Groote Schuur Hospital](#), was a success. Washkansky's body did not reject the heart, due in large part to the immunosuppressive drugs he received. But those drugs also weakened his immune system, and he contracted double pneumonia, which killed him 18 days after the transplant.

Barnard, who became an international celebrity (and reveled in it) as a result of the transplant, soldiered on. Over the next several years he performed additional heart transplants, with the survival times for his patients gradually improving. One patient, Dorothy Fisher, survived for 24 years after receiving a new heart in 1969.

Other surgeons, however, weren't as bullish on transplant surgery, because of the high risk of organ rejection by the recipient. It wasn't until [cyclosporine](#) came into widespread use in the early 1980s that an effective means of reducing that risk was found. After that, organ-transplant surgery took off.

Barnard, meanwhile, became more interested in anti-aging research, and his reputation took a hit when he lent his name to Glycel, an anti-aging skin cream that in the end did nothing at all to slow the process. Barnard died in 2001.

(Source: Various)