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**Sign donor cards, she urges**

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**TRANSPLANT VETERAN**

By **JOE MATYAS**



A quarter-century ago, Heather Fisher's chances of living another year were slim. Her liver was failing, she was getting weaker and sicker and her time was running out. She was given a new lease on life when she became one of the first patients in London to receive a liver transplant.

Twenty-five years later, Fisher is healthy, happy and working as a nurse in a London Health Sciences Centre acute pain clinic.

She's been nursing full-time since recovering from the transplant, for several years as an operating room nurse.

"Although the transplant was done years ago, it feels like yesterday," said Fisher.

"I think about my good fortune every day and I feel blessed. The gift of the organ restored my life."

Fisher recently marked the 25th anniversary of her transplant -- "liver-versary," as she calls it -- on a day spent with London firefighters, her own salute to Organ Donor Awareness Week. Although Fisher has to take anti-rejection drugs, she's experienced no appreciable side-effects from the medication.

"I've been remarkably healthy," she said. "I've never had a serious illness since the transplant, just the occasional cold or flu."

Fisher urges people to sign organ donation cards.

Across Canada, about 4,000 people are waiting for organs, including 1,800 in Ontario.

Canada has one of the lowest donation rates in the developed world, said Fisher.

"We can do better as a nation, that's for sure."

Canada's organ donation rate is about 13 donors per one million people, compared with 20 per million in the U.S. and 31 per million in Spain.

Donation rates vary across Canada, with London -- a leading small organ transplant centre -- near the top, at 23 per million. As a transplantation centre, Londoners have learned and heard more about organ donations, said Fisher.

In the late 1950s, kidney transplants were done in London for the first time at St. Joseph's Hospital.

University Hospital opened in 1972 and quickly established a transplant program.

The city's first liver transplant was done there in 1977, the first heart transplant in 1981 and first lung and bone marrow transplants in 1989.

Fisher was the recipient of the fifth liver transplanted in London. Since then, more than 1,200 others have been done.

Organ donations save lives, she said, adding some people die waiting for one.

"If you decide to become a donor, it's important to sign a donation form and talk it over with your loved ones so they know your intentions," she said.