

Please mail news  
for this section  
to The Billings Gazette

The Billings Gazette

# Neighbors

Section

# B

Tuesday, January 24, 1995



Once a severe diabetic, Monte Harstad, right, is recovering from a double transplant of his pancreas and kidney and is cured of the debilitating disease. He and his girlfriend, Robyn Kramer, are making plans for an active future.

# CATCHING up with LIFE

## Billings man no longer diabetic after kidney, pancreas transplant

**M**ONTE HARSTAD, a diabetic for 31 years, has thrown his insulin and needles away.

On Oct. 25, 1994 the Billings resident underwent a pancreas and kidney transplant at Virginia Mason Hospital in Seattle. Now the 34-year-old is no longer diabetic and is eager to lead an active life.

"My blood tests have been normal. It's really been a change," Harstad said. "I've been on insulin since I was 3 years old. It's been hard to get used to the fact that I don't have to take that shot anymore.

"I can eat all I want and live a normal life. I have so much more freedom," he said.

But Harstad's problems are not behind him. He still must pay off the \$7,000 remainder from his \$45,000 hospital bill. And he must take — for the rest of his life — anti-rejection drugs that will cost up to \$1,000 a month, said his nephrologist, Dr. Charlotta Eaton, a Billings physician.

Nonetheless, Harstad's newest problems are a welcome switch from the lifestyle of a severe diabetic, especially being hooked up to dialysis equipment three times a week at Deaconess Medical Center in Billings.

Eaton said 30 to 50 percent of all diabetics experience kidney failure and require either a trans-

plant or dialysis treatment. Conducted over a period of five years in Harstad's case, the dialysis procedure drained the aspiring rancher of his otherwise boundless energy.

---

### *Stories by Christine Lyall Of The Gazette Staff*

---

"Physically, I was in shape, but mentally I got worn down from sitting for three hours," he said. During that time, tubes connected to a filter would be inserted into Harstad's arms.

In conjunction with the onset of neuropathy, or nerve damage — a complication that often accompanies diabetes — the dialysis treatments killed sensation in Harstad's hands and feet. As a result of the disease, Harstad is also legally blind.

Now, though, Harstad no longer has to be strapped to Billings and the dialysis unit, and he is regaining feeling in his hands, fingers and toes. He also might regain part of his eyesight once his optical nerves start to rejuvenate.

Harstad, originally of Rosebud, was born to ranching parents as a healthy, active baby. He became a diabetic at the age of 3 when he suffered permanent pancreatic damage in a car wreck.

From then on, Harstad's boyhood was a series of daily urine tests, insulin shots and dietary regulations. By 1980, he was also enduring several blood tests a day.

Harstad remained active, however, participating in school sports, working on his parents' ranch and, later, working as a professional cleaner in Missoula. As an adolescent, he also somewhat abused his body by consuming — as most teenagers do — soda pop and junk food.

The physical activity and dietary abuse eventually caught up with him. His sight deteriorated and his kidneys shut down. He reluctantly moved to Billings to receive dialysis treatments at Deaconess.

Harstad was on a transplant waiting list for four years before he underwent his first kidney transplant in 1993. The organ had to be removed three days later when the artery leading to it clotted.

That's when Harstad decided to apply for a double transplant. That's also when he learned that the pancreas transplant — which Medicare would not cover because of the operation's experimental nature — would cost an estimated \$45,000 to \$60,000. The state paid for the kidney transplant.

Harstad, his family and his girlfriend, Robyn Kramer, a technician at the dialysis unit, conducted a state and region-wide fund-rais-

## Treatments sparked romance

Going to Deaconess Medical Center's dialysis unit three times a week, three hours each visit over a period of five years was hardly Monte Harstad's idea of fun.

Aside from the fact that the procedure saved his life, however, one other significant occurrence took place in the unit: A romance.

Harstad, 34, had been a diabetic since he was 3. He regularly went to the Billings hospital for dialysis treatments until he underwent a transplant of his pancreas and kidney that has cured him of the disease.

While his arms were hooked

up to the dialysis equipment, Harstad's heart was hooked on a technician, Robyn Kramer, who works in the unit.

Although Harstad was a dialysis recipient for five years and constantly pestered Kramer for a date, it wasn't until two years ago that Kramer surrendered. It was Harstad's birthday; he wanted to go out for Chinese food and Kramer couldn't turn him down, even though she'd had her reasons for resisting.

"I was reluctant to get involved with someone with a lot of medical problems because it's kind of scary," Kramer said. "As

I got to know him more personally, though, I found he was a neat person with a lot to offer."

In fact, Kramer wanted to keep him around, a feeling that developed out of more than just her natural compassion for her patients. So she threw herself into a fund-raising campaign to raise \$45,000 to \$60,000 for Harstad's pancreas transplant.

"I feel we both have more of a future," Kramer said. "Monte was always so active, and if he'd completely lost his eyesight or had to have a leg amputated, I think he would've given up."

ing campaign that brought in \$38,000 — enough to get him on the double transplant waiting list.

"We decided we had to do this if not for Monte, but to blaze a path for others," Kramer said.

Within a few weeks, Harstad moved up on the list when all dialysis "accesses" on his body clotted off. Over the years, four areas on Harstad's arms had been cut, grafted and maneuvered to make room for catheters and vein-

artery connections — all of which finally gave out.

That led to his successful surgery last fall in Seattle. Now Kramer is looking forward to a healthy, happy future with Harstad.

"There's always the possibility for rejection, but if he takes care of himself and takes his medication, he should be fine," she said.

Harstad, who chops wood for a living, is also trying to raise the re-

maining \$7,000 for his pancreas operation. And he said he wants to get on with his new life.

"All I ever wanted to be was a good cowboy and ranch hand," Harstad said. "I'd love to have a ranch and it's not an impossibility."

"I want to keep busier now more than ever because I have a lot to catch up on."

Donations toward Harstad's operation can be made to the Monte Harstad Medical Fund at any First Interstate Bank location.