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Critically ill COVID-19 patient on ECMO successfully survived lung transplant

As a cardiac surgeon with extensive experience of lung transplantations, Dr. Wojciech Karolak is used to performing complicated procedures. However, a recent case involving a critically ill female COVID-19 patient on Extracorporeal Membrane Oxygenation (ECMO) became an extraordinary lifesaving experience.

“The lung transplant cured the patient, but it was ECMO that saved her life,” says Dr. Wojciech Karolak. “Recent statistics* show that 50 percent of COVID-19 patients treated with ECMO survive. This therapy gave them a second chance at life.”

The female patient was already on ECMO – which replaces the lung and/or heart function by pumping and oxygenating the blood outside the body – when she arrived at the cardiac surgery department at the University Clinical Center and Medical University of Gdansk in Poland. Getinge’s portable device called Cardiohelp, enables patient transport without compromising the ECMO circuit and can easily be deployed at the bedside or in the field, offering patients portable, seamless heart-lung support.

“The patient’s lungs were destroyed, and she took a turn for the worse before we managed to stabilize her and perform all tests necessary to move forward. Finally, a donor became available, and we proceeded with the urgent lung transplantation,” says Dr. Wojciech Karolak.

In this case, the surgical team performed the entire transplant with the patient on veno-arterial ECMO, which means that the machine supports both respiratory and circulatory functions.

“Using ECMO during transplants allows us to lower the dose of anticoagulants, which reduces the bleeding with no adverse aspect on the patient,” Dr. Wojciech Karolak explains. “In all, this was a very successful surgery. The patient is living an independent life again, without any need of supplemental oxygen.”

The Gdansk Lung Transplantation Program was initiated in 2018 and the team has performed 36 transplants so far.

Dr. Wojciech Karolak concludes: "Saving lives is part of my job, but when I think about this case, it does bring a tear to the eye. It was a very close call."

*<https://www.else.org/Registry/FullCOVID19RegistryDashboard.aspx>

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Photo: Sylwia Mierzewska, UCK

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