

A virtual anaesthetic circa 1967
David Sidebotham

On December 3 1967 the first successful human-to-human heart transplant took place at Groote Schuur Hospital, Cape Town, South Africa. The donor was a 52 year old man with ischaemic cardiomyopathy, Louis Washkansky. The donor was a 24-year old woman, Denise Darvall, who had suffered a severe head injury in a motor vehicle accident while out shopping. The surgeon was Christiaan Barnard, a dashing 45 year old cardiothoracic surgeon who had trained under Walter Lillehei at the University of Minnesota. The anaesthetist was Joseph Ozinsky, the 40 year old head of cardiothoracic anaesthesia at the University of Cape Town. Together, Barnard and Ozinsky had performed 48 animal heart transplants prior to their first human heart transplant. Their successful transplant caused a wave of international publicity, casting Barnard into the spotlight, a position in which he would remain for many years. In addition to the Barnard team, a team at Stanford University, led by Norman Shumway, were also working towards a human-to-human transplant. Some commentators have criticized the Barnard team for rushing into the procedure despite being less prepared than the Stanford team. The patient survived for 18 days before succumbing to pneumonia. The surgeon became an international playboy, dating famous movie stars and marrying progressively younger women. The anaesthetist continued practicing cardiac anaesthesia quietly in Cape Town, finally retiring in 2001.