

# Real Life Safety Heroes: Dr. Christian Barnard – A Controversial Medical Genius



The heart transplant pioneer who euthanized his own mother.

Christian Barnard was the son of a poor Afrikaner preacher who grew up on the semi-arid Great Karroo plateau of South Africa. Walking 5 miles to his studies each day, Barnard graduated from Cape Town University and became a family physician on the Western Cape in 1951. In 1956, he received a postgraduate scholarship to study cardiothoracic surgery at the University of Minnesota. It was there that he met Norman Shumway, a researcher pioneering in prosthetic heart valves.

Barnard returned to his homeland in 1958 and became one of the country's most respected cardiac surgeons. In 1959, he performed South Africa's first successful kidney transplant. He also continued the work he had started with Shumay by carrying out experimental heart transplants on animals. Most of the more than 50 dogs on which Barnard operated died shortly after the procedure.

## The First Heart Transplant

In 1967, a 55-year-old grocer named Louis Washkansky suffering from diabetes and incurable heart disease turned to Barnard in desperation. A traffic accident victim who had died a day earlier provided a donor heart. So, Barnard and a team of 30

physicians conducted the first heart transplant in history. Washkansky survived the surgery. Although the patient would die 18 days later, the surgery demonstrated that human heart transplantation was possible.

After the breakthrough, Dr. Christian Barnard became an international superstar. "On Saturday, I was a little-known surgeon in South Africa. On Monday I was world renowned," he'd later quip. Barnard enjoyed the fame. Young and handsome, he was almost as fond of nightclubs as operating rooms. But he continued with his work. Subsequent heart transplants performed by Barnard proved more successful, with one patient surviving 24 years.

## **The Controversial Barnard**

Barnard was also a controversial figure who believed that medicine should focus on curing disease and alleviating suffering, rather than prolonging life. He believed in both active and passive euthanasia and admitted to practicing the latter on terminally ill patients, including his own mother. Many colleagues despised Barnard for his arrogance. Barnard was also an outspoken critic of apartheid who leveraged his fame to secure a seat in the South Africa legislature on an anti-apartheid platform.

Dr. Christian Barnard died on September 2, 2001, at the age of 79.