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James Earl Ray to go on TV to plead for liver

By Richard Willing
USA TODAY

James Earl Ray wants more than just a new trial. The convicted assassin of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. is looking for a replacement for his failing liver, and he's taking to the air waves to find one.

Ray and his brother Jerry, the family's spokesman, are scheduled to appear on Montel Williams' syndicated talk show next week, in part to pitch for a liver. The family also plans to set up a toll-free 800 number to help recruit potential donors.

The 68-year-old Ray, currently held in a Tennessee prison hospital, is suffering from cirrhosis, a scarring of the organ that can lead to liver failure. Without a liver transplant, Ray will die within the year, Jerry Ray said.

Lawyers for Ray are due in court in Memphis tomorrow, to argue that the rifle Ray is said to have used to kill King in 1968 was not the murder weapon. Their ultimate hope: that Ray's 1969 guilty plea will be set aside and a new trial ordered.

The King family supports a

new trial as a way to resolve lingering questions about whether Ray had help killing King and eluding capture for more than two months.

Jerry Ray denies suggestions that the call for a new trial is a ploy to get his brother a liver.

"I can see where some folks might say that, but some folks would say anything about James," Jerry Ray said. "The truth is he wants to get on that witness stand and testify. A liver is about his only chance."

Ray's chances of getting a new liver are slim but not impossi-

ble. Ordinarily, recipients are matched anonymously with donors by the United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS), a Richmond, Va., agency that contracts with the federal government. Eligibility is based on medical urgency, blood and tissue type, waiting time and other factors.

Jerry Ray said that his brother's age and inmate status make it unlikely that he would get a liver through the usual way.

But direct donation, in which a liver is earmarked for a specific recipient, is permitted in many states. To receive a liver that

way, Ray would first have to be evaluated at one of the nation's 120 liver transplant facilities.

A "very small number" of livers have been transplanted by direct donation, said Joel Newman, a spokesman for UNOS. Public solicitation of organs was once more frequent but has seldom occurred since the UNOS system was developed in 1986.

About 3,900 liver transplants were performed last year. Currently, 7,684 potential recipients are awaiting liver transplants, according to UNOS.

Mary Duffy, executive producer of *The Montel Williams Show*, said she expects the "liver issue" to come up in a wider discussion of Ray's guilt or innocence. "It's an important historical interview," she said.

Jerry Ray acknowledged that the liver appeal was "unusual" but said it is appropriate.

"We ain't cutting nobody out of a liver; we'd be getting a liver that ain't coming in otherwise," he said. "Without it, the chances of getting James all the way through a trial ain't very good."

Ray said his brother's cirrhosis appears to have been caused by hepatitis, not by alcoholism.

Montel Williams is scheduled to tape his interview with James Earl Ray this Friday at DeBerry prison hospital near Nashville.



James Earl Ray:
Suffers cirrhosis