

THE ULTIMATE GIFT

One Decision Can
Save Eight Lives

by Lia Tremblay

Like most end-of-life decisions, organ donation can be hard to discuss with loved ones. But one productive conversation can make a huge difference to a family in crisis.

"On average, 78 people receive lifesaving organ transplants each day," said Lisa Schaffner, Public Relations and Marketing Director for the United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS). "When you ask around at work, at church, in your community, you'd be amazed at the number of people who have been touched by organ donation."

UNOS oversees the nationwide matching of organs between deceased donors and living recipients. Unfortunately, there's a gap between the two that continues to widen: In a 20-year period, the number of people on waiting lists increased by more than 85,000. The number of donors increased by merely 8,700.

So why aren't more people making the decision to donate organs?

"There's a fear of talking about it," said Schaffner. "People shy away from talking about death, but this is actually not a conversation about death. It's about life."

Multiple lives, in fact: One donor can provide a heart, two lungs, two kidneys, a liver, pancreas and intestines, all to separate recipients. That's eight lives potentially saved by just one donor.

Dispelling the Myths

Some misconceptions about organ donation may be at the heart of many people's hesitation to register. Which of these have you been accepting as fact?



Myth #1: If the hospital knows you're an organ donor, they won't work hard to save your life.

This is not true at all. The team working to save your life in an emergency is entirely separate from the people who would handle your donation if those efforts failed. In fact, hospital personnel are among the likeliest people to become organ donors, having seen for themselves that it can save multiple lives without endangering their own.

Myth #2: I'm too old (or sick) to donate my organs.

Age won't necessarily make your organs unusable (Schaffner recalls a recent donor who was 81 years old!). And very few medical conditions will automatically disqualify your organs from transplantation. Skilled, knowledgeable medical personnel can determine whether your donation is usable when the time comes.

Myth #3: Thousands of people die every day, so there are plenty of organs to go around.

People do die every day, but relatively few die under circumstances that make for a successful organ donation. If there were plenty of organs to go around, there would be no waiting lists.

Myth #4: My family will have an extra medical bill if I donate my organs.

Donor families are never charged for the procedures related to organ donation.

Myth #5: It's against my religion.

Are you sure? Most major religions have no restriction on organ donation at all. If you're not really sure where your faith stands on the issue, talk it over with a member of your clergy.

Becoming a Donor

It's easier than it's ever been to establish yourself as an organ donor. At the DMV, it's part of the process for obtaining or renewing your license. Just answer "yes" when asked about organ donation, and you'll get a little heart icon on your license that shows you've made that decision.

To register online, just go to donatelifenc.org and follow the directions there. You'll be added to an official statewide database, where your desire to donate will be recorded.

Both of these methods will make your decision to donate a legally binding contract, which means one less decision for your loved ones to make at the end of your life. And even if your death occurs in another state, your decision will be honored there.



Organ Donation Month Art Contest

Carolina Donor Services partnered with Cape Fear Valley Health in April to hold its third annual canvas painting contest to raise awareness about Organ Donation Month. This year's theme was "Bicycle: Life is a Beautiful Ride." Hospital units submitted their entries, which were displayed in the medical center lobby and voted on by the public and staff. The winner will be displayed later this year at the hospital's annual Organ Donor Memorial event.

Have the Conversation

At your next family dinner, talk about organ donation. Make your wishes known, so that it's not a surprise or mystery if something should happen to you. And see if some of those myths are keeping your family members from making a life-saving decision of their own.

Here are some interesting facts to get the conversation going:

The heart can only be in transit between donor and recipient for a maximum of six hours, so it tends to stay within a 500-mile radius of where it is donated.

Kidneys, on the other hand, remain viable for up to 48 hours, and can be sent to recipients just about anywhere in the nation.

Kidneys are also the most-needed organ and have the highest transplantation success rate.

Sicker patients and children take priority on the waiting list. Fame and fortune do not get you any higher on the list.

On average, 18 people a day die while waiting for the organs they need. (At unos.org, you can see a real-time update of the number of people on transplant waiting lists.)

With so many recipients adding years to their lives, and so many donor families seeing positive outcomes from their grief, there is much to be thankful for. Don't be afraid to consider what will happen to your organs when the time comes, or to talk to your family about the decision. One "yes" from you could bring tears of joy to eight other families.