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Harvest of Life: Organ Donation

Maybe you've seen the bumper sticker; "Don't take your organs with you, we need them here!"

How True!

But how, and why would somebody want to do this?

The how is very simple, your drivers license has a mark on it that enables this to be checked and will serve as notification in the event of an unforeseen emergency that leaves you unable to communicate. Please tell your loved ones of your decision as well, this will save a lot of grief during a very trying time if you are mortally incapacitated. Directions can also be left on your living will and/or durable power of attorney. Another way is to go to <http://organdonor.gov> and download the donor card and keep it in your wallet. When an emergency room finds a suitable candidate, it's routine that any identification on the patient is reviewed for identification purposes. The donor card will be noted when appropriate and acted on.

The easiest way to think of this, is as the gift of life that can be your final departure gift to those left behind. Parts of you will live on in service to others, it's not simply a noble gesture, it's a chance to live on and help others that really doesn't cost you anything at all and can provide great solace to those left behind.

When does this event happen? We've probably all seen the movie Coma about organ donors kept in suspended animation so that they can be harvested (yes, that's the actual term used by the procurement team of the organ/tissue banks). Frankenstein may also come to mind. There have been instances of unscrupulous funeral home directors selling tissues in violation of numerous laws—they are prosecuted when found out with severe penalties. One of the bright spots in the over-supply of attorneys that this country has, is that they keep everybody very honest and careful. For the unresponsive comatose patients, there's a protocol that needs to be strictly followed. Medications that can depress consciousness must be withheld for a period of time long enough to allow them to be metabolized/excreted from the body. Two independent physicians must verify that the patient is brain dead following very strict criteria before anything can be removed from the body. There are third world countries in which people voluntarily give up an organ in exchange for money. This is not something to be condoned, and needs to be held to the

current standards of the United Network For Organ Sharing (UNOS) in order to ensure that no communicable diseases are transmitted with the organ, nor other problems such as cancer are also implanted into a recipient.

What can be harvested and passed on to others? Ideally, if the body is in good condition and still has adequate circulation, then any entire organs that are in good shape can be taken “whole”. These include kidneys, heart, lungs, liver, pancreas & intestines. Often these are done as kidney/pancreas, heart/lung and other combined organ groups. Diseased organs are not taken, however there may be use for good parts of those organs.

Tissues that can be taken include heart valves, middle ear bones, skin, bone, vein, cartilage, tendons & ligaments.

Stem cells which are cells that can grow into many different forms of tissues and organs can also be harvested, often from bone marrow but also from peripheral blood and umbilical cords.

Finally, blood and platelets can be taken to be used in transfusing people in need of that.

How many survivors can one person help with total donation? That’s a great question but is hard to answer due to a variety of issues that modify what can be used, when & where. Since we have 2 lungs, 2 kidneys, they can each go to separate people (although this isn’t always done quite like that for technical reasons), which would in theory be four recipients, plus, one heart, 1 liver, 1 pancreas, a segment of intestines brings it up to 8 or more, but then in addition tissues can be taken, 2 healthy corneas from eyes, 2 sets of middle ear bones can bring it up to 12 recipients, beyond that, tissues mentioned above including blood and platelets can be spread to dozens of others.

Another option is whole body donation. This is commonly done for medical training and research. There is nothing quite as amazing as being a first-year medical student and getting acquainted with the cadaver that will teach you so much during your first year of education. The body is viewed with the utmost respect and even reverence, there by the gracious generosity of somebody who wanted to help future generations of physicians learn their profession.

The Matching Process;

This isn’t like “The Dating Game” or “Let’s Make a Deal”. Tissue has to be immunologically compatible or the organ/tissue will be rejected by the recipients immune system. When a potential donor is identified, tissue typing is done to find out who can potentially receive the organs. The United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS) maintains a centralized computer network that links all organ procurement organizations and transplant centers. They maintain a national waiting list. Patients needing organs get on the transplant list if they’re qualified by criteria including failure of the involved organ and overall health status. The transplant team will notify the patient when an appropriate organ is available. Time is of the essence once this happens. Organs are commonly transferred immediately to the center in which it will be used. Organs generally can only be maintained out of the body for a period of hours at the most. Waiting times vary; for a heart, the average waiting time is 230 days, Lung, 1,068 days, liver 796 days, kidney 1,121 days and pancreas 501 days. There are strict criteria to ensure that there is no “playing favorites”.

Organ & tissue removal is done under very strict sterile technique in the operating room of the hospital where the recipient is located. Cultures for bacteria are taken at several areas and times throughout the process, if any bacteria are identified the procedure are cancelled. Recipients will be on strong medications to suppress their immune system for the rest of their lives so that the donated organ is not rejected. Any infectious agents that are identified could potentially kill the immune-suppressed recipient.

Financially, donors don’t assume any burden, the costs of the process are covered by transplant team and ultimately the recipients.

Most religious organizations support organ donation as a way of passing on the gift of life.

What can you do to stay off of the organ needed list?

Keep your weight down to where it belongs! Live a healthy lifestyle, stop smoking

Get in to see your doctor for regular physicals, recommended at least by the age of 40 for men and annually for women who are sexually active. Listen to your doctor and try to follow the advice given, if for some reason you can’t let the doctor know and work on alternatives that you can both agree on.

Hopefully, after reviewing this information, the reader will be interested enough to look into becoming an organ donor—it's easy, doesn't cost anything and sure is great to be able to give, especially when you are giving life itself!

Stay Healthy!

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