

Solace in Heartache

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I have had the unique opportunity and privilege in working with the Wisconsin Donor Network (WDN) throughout my entire career. When I first began as a graduate nurse in 2005, I worked in a combined Neurosurgical and Surgical ICU. I was a witness to both the donor and the recipient side of the organ donation process—as one patient may have been a donor, and the recipient only a few doors down. As time has passed, however, the units have split and I have spent the last seven years practicing in the Neurosurgical ICU, where I care for donor patients and witness family members and even patients, through first person consent, giving the greatest gift of life through donation. I feel blessed to have played an active role on both sides of the process.

I frequently work 1:1 with the WDN to best advocate for our patients in carrying out their wishes when they are no longer able to speak for themselves. I consider it a high honor to have played a part in this extremely sensitive and vulnerable time for loved ones of patients who have been declared dead through the brain criteria. To this day, it still amazes me that these family members and loved ones can make such a selfless decision, when they are undoubtedly dealing with one of the biggest heartbreaks. We cannot forget that for most of these families, the circumstances are raw, abrupt and completely unexpected as the decline and progression to brain death is often rapid. I feel very fortunate to work alongside an incredible team of nurses, physicians and WDN staff, who are professionally trained in talking with these patients' families at a time that many would consider untouchable.

I remember the mother who would not leave her twenty-two year old daughter's bedside, how devastated she was, and also how strong I found her to be, when she consented for her daughter to donate her organs through donation after circulatory death (DCD). It was a privilege to cry with her and take her daughter's handprints as a keepsake for the family to have and cherish. I remember the young mother had a little girl; I recall feeling so sad for this little person who would now grow up without a mother, but also found comfort that this child would someday come to understand the gifts that her mother gave to many others through organ and tissue donation.

I strongly believe part of my responsibility as a nurse lies within the importance of educating the community about tissue and organ donation. I take every opportunity to dispel rumors. I also encourage my family, my co-workers, and the public to take part in the "Yes I Will" campaign, where one has the chance to let their wishes be known and give first person consent.

The flipside to every happy transplant story is the tragic loss of a loved one on donation end. It has been a little over three years since my husband and I lost our daughter, at the tender age of six months, to pulmonary hypertension. Her death came like a thief in the night, as only a few weeks prior, we had taken her car seat to the hospital, expecting to bring her home in the very near future; the progression of her decline was literally within 96 hours. Because of my experience and knowledge of the DCD process, I questioned if this was even something that was done with babies my daughter's age, as I knew all of her other organs were perfect. Knowing that her demise was inevitable, my thoughts turned to making her life a gift to others. Unfortunately, my questions fell on deaf ears and I never was given the answers I had sought. I know my family is not an isolated case.

A goal in my career is to see that this issue is further researched and considered, even in the cases of the tiniest and most fragile patients. I know from experience that sometimes the best way to make sense of death for families is in finding that their loved one was able to live on through the gift of donation. It's the shred of solace in an otherwise heartbreaking situation that gives you the strength you need to keep moving forward. I wish my precious daughter could have given the gift of life; however, in her death, I have found a renewal in my desire to passionately advocate for these patients who donate, their families who make that selfless gift and ultimate consent, as well as ensure that hospitals continue to offer this priceless opportunity.