

Average Day

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2021 Joan Heimler Legacy of Life Scholarship Award Recipient

There is a recurring question directed at every new nurse when he or she starts bedside nursing. Why did you want to be a nurse? In the beginning, I never knew how to answer that question. Nursing was not my first love, so what was the deeper meaning for this life change? What I thought was going to be an average Friday for me in the Emergency Department clarified my answer.

I worked with Versiti during a handful of organ donation opportunities. All previous cases were ineligible for possible donation. At 0630, I received an EMS report for an unstable middle-aged man. With only minutes to prepare, a code stroke was called. Following stroke protocol, everything was in place. Patient arrived with an unstable airway forcing a change of plans. First, manage the airway, then immediate CT. I am not a radiologist, but the CT emanated a grave prognosis. After settling the patient back in the room, I turned to the patient's wife and son waiting at the bedside with eyes asking the million-dollar question: What's going on?

The emergency department is a place where bad news is delivered and quick decisions are made. Being a critical access hospital, we are not staffed with certain specialties such as neurology. A neurologist from our sister facility was consulted and brought on the line to speak with the family. A massive left-sided brain hemorrhage with midline shift. Family had the option to transfer their loved one, but the outcome or treatment would not change because of the fatal diagnosis.

While the family decided, the standard organ donor phone call was made. I expected the standard answer: the patient is not a candidate. Today was different. A phone call came from the Versiti coordinator stating the patient is an organ donor and eligible candidate. My heart started to flutter. My mind raced--what now? Due to the size of our facility, we have not done organ procurement in decades. Our Chief Nursing Officer, Medical Director, Hospitalist, surgery manager, and Versiti's hospital relations liaison all met to arrange this event. Meanwhile, in the ED, I was mediator for this family providing updates and support. I have never met a family so motivated and passionate about organ donation. This patient had a room full of support, despite our visitor policy due to the pandemic. There are times to make exceptions and break the rules, and this was one of them. At one point, that trauma room had 15 people who wanted this man to give the ultimate gift for someone else. Multiple members of this family were personally affected by organ donation, and this was their way to give back. Their passion gave me the motivation to be the best advocate. I wanted nothing but their wishes to be fulfilled. Six hours after admission with people funneling in and out, a decision was made. The donation was not going to be completed at our facility. I felt defeated, perplexed, and frustrated. This family wanted their loved one to stay at our facility and not be transferred. Our family-centered approach to care would have granted their wishes despite the outside world.

Our sister facility in one county over is not affiliated with Versiti. Therefore, the phone calls started all over to the other organization. I apologized to this family for having to restart this process, but they never complained. The simple statement of "whatever needs to be done we will do" is all they

said. The patient was accepted at the facility, so we waited on available transport. The estimated time for the patient to leave was 1930. I had spent 12 hours with this patient. For most nurses that is expected. In the emergency department that is unheard of. The motto for our world is treat quickly and efficiently. Not treat and wait. I never had a conversation with this man. I was never able to get his perceptions on life, ask him about his career, or his family while the time passed. I learned this man's life story through his family. I watched a wife never leave the bedside and hold his hand like they did when they dated. I witnessed a son make decisions that he never dreamed of making. I listened to a brother talk about the good ol' days. I learned about this man's character, even though I will never hear his voice. I feel like I know him even though I have never seen him leave that hospital bed.

That time for shift change came, and I walked into the room knowing this would be my last time. I wanted to soak it in. I saw eight people waiting and listening for what I had to say to the new nurse taking over. I gave my usual detailed report with no questions asked by my partner. I mistakenly looked one last time at the son, then the wife, and I could feel my eyes becoming hot with tears. I asked if I could give her a hug and she openly agreed. My heart hurt yet never felt so comforted. This was the first time I have cried in a patient's room.

Since this day, I have become an advocate for our facility to revamping our organ donation policies. Our organization is currently in the process of ensuring we are able to complete organ procurement. I want to provide education for our medical staff that life does not just end. There is an opportunity of life and hope. I have since realized this is why I became a nurse. I want to be the voice for the voiceless--that advocate that every patient deserves. Unfortunately, the patient passed away before organ procurement could be completed. His memory will be the driving force for change and advancing care at our rural facility. This particular "average" day renewed my view that life is precious, and with organ donation there's hope and the story continues.