

Organ Donation: A Ray of Light

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The memory of getting my driver's license is not a vivid one. I passed the written exam with flying colors, and the driving test was fairly uneventful. What I do remember, however, is agreeing to be an organ donor and applying that bright orange "ORGAN DONOR" sticker to my license. Before becoming an ICU nurse, the sticker was merely a distant visual reminder that if something ever happened to me, my organs would be used to help others. It was as simple as that. When I became an ICU nurse, I realized that organ donation is a ray of light in a time of hopelessness and despair. I am now tasked with nurturing the process to ensure that ray of light reaches as far and wide as possible.

There is a charge in the air when a donor patient is on the unit that I can only describe as weighty and mixed. On one hand, there is an overwhelming sense of melancholy and bereavement that comes from knowing that despite our best efforts, a life has been lost. Twelve hour shifts mean that oftentimes, a nurse has spent the entirety of his/her day or night doing what they could to ensure the best patient outcomes. Relationships are established with families, and you cannot help but become emotionally invested. On the other hand, there is a sense of incredible responsibility that is different than the everyday responsibilities of being a critical care nurse. It is a sense of responsibility that comes from knowing that a life lost could mean a new beginning for someone else- a sense of something good coming from something awful.

I am reminded of a recent organ donor on my unit. It was the first of a three day stretch for me. My first day began with a new admission. The patient was young and her prognosis was poor. I understood from diagnostic imaging and a review of the chart that we needed a miracle. So, I hit the ground running that day chasing that miracle. I juggled road trips, navigated neurology and neurosurgery consults, battled blood pressure issues, and performed neurological checks every hour. I also met the patient's family including a young sister, best friend, and father. I listened to heartfelt stories, helped hang family pictures, encouraged the family to eat, and made sure their spiritual care needs were being met. It didn't take me long to notice dad was not doing well.

Day two was rough. The night nurse had assessed a change in neurological status for the worse. "It doesn't look good. Neurology will be here soon to declare brain death. Dad isn't doing too hot." she said. But, a ray of light had begun to glimmer. The patient was a registered organ donor, and family had expressed an interest in organ donation. WI Organ Donor Network representatives were on the unit. Brain death was established early that morning. The chaplain was at the bedside, family and friends said their goodbyes, and phone calls were made. The familiar sense of melancholy and bereavement enveloped the unit, as did the great sense of responsibility. So, I hit the ground running chasing that glimmering ray of light. I worked closely with Donor Network representatives, I fulfilled orders, I drew labs, and I worked to keep our patient stable. Through it all, I too, noticed that "dad wasn't doing too hot." In fact, dad was spiraling, and in the midst of an emotional breakdown. It was clear to everyone around him that he was going to need additional emotional support to get him through this terrible time.

I knew something above and beyond the norm needed to be done to ensure that the organ donor process was one that dad would someday reflect positively on. My hope for organ donor patients is always that their loved ones will someday take solace in the light that their loved ones have brought to so many others. I called for a caregiver conference consisting of myself, my manager, the chaplain, and the palliative care nurse practitioner. Together, we shared what we knew about dad, his mental health needs, his support systems, and personal interactions. We discussed everything from whether or not he had had breakfast, to bereavement counseling. I spoke with Organ Donor representatives and learned that they continue to reach out to loved ones long after procurement. Together we brainstormed a plan of care for dad that would include him in the process as much as possible. We reached out to family, we provided resources, and we made sure dad ate a hearty lunch. It seemed so trivial at the time. Obviously, nothing we did could fill the aching hole in dad's heart. But, the hope is always that someday loved ones will be able to see the ray of light that organ donation provides to so many people.

Day three was organ procurement day. I used the unit's memory box to cut locks of my patient's hair and tie them with pretty bows to present to each of her family members. I pressed my patient's hand to an ink pad and provided her dad with that memento as well. He was doing better he said. The family we had reached out to was on their way, and would soon be at his side. He told me he was relieved to hear that many of his daughter's organs had been placed. He was heartbroken, but hopeful for the many people his daughter would help.

That. That right there is why I am so incredibly grateful for the opportunity to witness, first-hand, the power that organ donation has to change lives. It is why I feel so strongly about organ donation. It is why I have become an Organ Donation Champion on my unit. Organ donation is the ray of light in a time of hopelessness and despair with the power to reach far and wide to give so many others an opportunity to live their best lives.