

Organ Donation Advocacy: A Personal and Professional

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My first conversation regarding organ donation happened long before I became a nurse. During the early months of my sophomore year at college for nursing, my younger brother was hit by a drunk driver. He sustained a severe head injury and his prognosis was extremely poor. As his sister, I was devastated, and attempted to support my other three brothers in their grief. As a daughter of divorced parents, I tried to be physically and emotionally present for both my mother and father during this most difficult time. As a budding nurse, I inquired about organ donation, if my brother's injuries led to his demise. My brother, being young and healthy, would have been considered for organ donation if he had died. My parents and brothers were shocked that I could even think about this. It wasn't until years later that my mother thanked me for inquiring about the possibility to help others. My brother did not die. He awakened from the drug-induced coma with severe mental impairment and violent anger issues. He was confined to various nursing homes over a ten year period, until he died due to postop complications. At this time, we were told that he was not a cornea, bone or tissue donor candidate due to his prolonged nursing home residency.

During my 31 years of nursing, 21 years being in an ICU/CCU setting—with 11 of those years in a trauma ICU—I have interacted with both Organ Procurement Organizations: the UW OPO at Madison and WDN. Working in a trauma ICU, death of relatively healthy young individuals due to fatal injuries was unfortunately a common occurrence. As each case is unique and extremely sad, some are especially heart-wrenching, and the memory of these will be with me forever.

One in particular is of a young boy, involved in a car accident on a snowy night, just before Christmas, sustaining a fatal head injury. Even though the boy was significantly younger than my brother was, it took me right back to my brother's bedside on that first awful night. His mother hospitalized in another room across the hall, his two sisters pronounced dead at the scene. I distinctly remember the neurosurgeon arriving that evening with the results of the brain flow study indicating brain death and proclaiming "Merry F...ing Christmas"/ The OPO was called, the organ donation process initiated. We kept this young boy sustained on life support while arrangements for organ harvestation were made, recipients were located, and the OPO obtained consent from a devastated father who was mourning the loss of three children. This man, crippled with grief, sat at his son's bedside, begging and praying for a miracle. I helped him through his confusion of "how can he be dead if his heart is still beating, his chest is rising and falling, and his tiny hand is still warm"? As the OR time approached, and his hope for a miracle diminished, he was ready to say goodbye. Obstructed by tubes, wires, cords and equipment, we sensed that the father could not get close enough to his son. We asked if he would like to hold him. The expression of "Oh my God, can I?" that came over his tear-soaked face brought tears to everyone's eyes. Gently we lifted this young boy into his father's arms while he sat in the recliner next to his bed. No tubes, wires, equipment or monitoring devices were compromised. It was one of the most rewarding feelings for me, as a nurse, and the father was beyond grateful. The room of a dying person can become a gateway where pain, suffering and death are met with faith, hope and love.

I've been a passionate advocate for organ and tissue donation through my brother's ineligibility to be an organ donor; through my father's inability to be an organ recipient (kidney failure on hemodialysis), and then the ineligibility to be an organ donor upon his death; and through the multiple tragic cases I have seen throughout my nursing career. I have provided direct care to the dying patient, provided nurturing support to the families who have made this generous decision, and maintain an active role as an organ and tissue donation advocate for the hospital I work at, and the community setting. By educating and encouraging people to give first-person consent to be an organ donor, if this is their desire, and having these difficult conversations with their loved ones, making their wishes known, before a crisis occurs; can help make a devastating situation less stressful.