

After Time of Death

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2022 Joan Heimler Legacy of Life Scholarship Award Recipient

When I was in high-school I knew that I would become a nurse. I have always loved helping people, and always thought of myself as a calming presence during stressful situations. During my high school years, I also got the gift of being exposed to the recipient side of organ donation. I had an uncle who was in heart failure with the only hope of a cure coming in the form of a heart transplant. I still remember the phone call that I got from my aunt saying that my uncle had a donor and it was heart transplant day! Some amazing donor family gave my family a gift of a heart. They made the selfless choice of donation, and my uncle got to experience ten more years with us because of them. My family will always be beyond grateful for the gift of life he received. When I entered into nursing school, I got to be exposed to organ donation by caring for a donor and recipient patient while in clinical. This helped to confirm that I wanted to care for donor and recipient patients in my nursing career.

“Time of death is...” These are words that most people will never have to hear. They are words that no family should ever have to come to terms with, words that no parent should consider. But what happens after these words are said? What are the next steps? This is a question that was asked of me recently by a family who had just had their child declared braindead. They took an hour and allowed these words to soak in, then they turned to me, their nurse, to find out what happens next.

I have had the privilege of helping more patients and families than I can count go through the process of organ donation, both on the recipient and donor side of donation. Of these many patients, there are always those that stay with you. I cared for a family who had a couple of children in the ICU due to a horrific accident. I admitted one of the children, and it quickly became apparent that he would not survive. About 36 hours after his accident, his parents had to hear “time of death is...”, all while one of his siblings was laying in the room next to him fighting for his life. The parents were presented with the option of organ donation. They quickly agreed, stating that their child would have wanted to help others if he had the option. Caring for this family and this patient became more challenging as the week went on. One child had passed away, one was still in critical condition, and a couple more were suffering both physically and emotionally from having been in this accident together. While Versiti worked on placing the patient’s organs, the family of these children were able to gather around each other and support one another. Their sense of grace and the calm that they instilled in the room so that they could care for one another was beyond inspiring. I watched this amazing family in awe of their strength, all while guiding them in the donation journey- answering all of their questions about what we were doing and why. After a few days, I got the privilege of walking beside this family to the operating room with their child, which is something I will never forget. This experience with organ donation is just one of many that I have had the honor of going through in my career.

Nurses play a vital role in organ donation. We are the providers who spend the most time with our patient’s and their families. We care for our patients after they have passed, and continue to care for them

until the time of donation. For me, I am not just caring for the patient and their family during the donor process, but I am also caring for all of the future patients that the organs will be gifted to. It is my duty to ensure that I am giving the recipient patients their best chance of success by taking the absolute best care of the organs before donation. A nurse cared for my uncle and my family by caring for the heart he received before it came to him. By collaborating with the nurse coordinators at Versiti, I feel that I am giving patients a shot at a healthier future free of sickness with the gift of a new organ.