

President's Page

Organ Donation — Plan to Give the Gift of Life

by Todd Pollock, MD



On a beautiful Saturday afternoon last September, a good friend of mine laughed and joked with his wife and two daughters as he got on his 1993 Harley Fat Boy to meet a friend for a leisurely ride in the countryside. He was an experienced and cautious rider. When he never arrived back home, his wife found him at Parkland, admitted as a “John Doe” after being struck by a car that entered an intersection against the light. His helmet did not prevent a severe head injury and he incurred several other injuries.

His wife, confused and in shock, called me for help as I was a doctor, and she knew I had trained at Parkland and may have some insight. My wife, Kasi, and I spent a long night with her in the Parkland ICU waiting room, sitting in as the neurosurgeon explained things, comforting her and helping her understand the medical jargon. After he was stabilized and extensively assessed, physicians determined that his head injury was not survivable.

A young, healthy, bright man with a beautiful, loving family and a wonderful future was struck down in a second, changing forever the lives of his family and

of his many close friends. I can't remember ever feeling such profound sadness. His wife kept telling me how thankful she was for my help that night, but all I could think about was that I never had felt so helpless and how badly I wanted to do something of substance.

As physicians, we have experienced these life and death situations, but usually in a more clinical and emotionally tangential way. We give an update to the family, briefly share a moment, and then move on. Certainly, we care and we feel — but we compartmentalize.

Much later, I realized that what my friend had appreciated was simply our presence — she didn't have to go through the experience alone. I remember thinking how remarkably clear her thoughts seemed and how gracefully she handled herself through this terrible time. Most remarkably, through the fog of this horrible tragedy, this wonderful woman retained the goodness in her heart to give her husband's organs for transplantation. She was able to turn what was a devastatingly negative event for her family into one with profoundly positive effects for many other families.

This was an eye-opening experience for me. I have been fortunate to have spent most of my life on the doctor side of the equation. As physicians, we are used to building emotional walls. We marvel at the incredible science of medicine and, in this case, organ transplantation. The storied history goes back centuries — from rudimentary attempts at grafting to Carrell's pioneering experiments and anastomotic suturing techniques, (fellow plastic surgeon) Joseph Murray's first renal transplant, and Jean Borel's discovery of the immunosuppressive properties of

cyclosporine isolated from fungus, to name a few. Every step along the way is more fascinating and amazing than the previous.

But then there is the other side — the human side. These are the lives that must be taken away for this amazing process to take place. These are the people who are touched by the passing of a child, a spouse, a parent, or a friend. This is the situation that physicians experience by virtue of our profession and by the randomness of being on call or working a shift. If we blink and if we don't stop and smell the coffee, we may miss the honor and privilege we have as physicians to share this important, life-changing moment with our fellow human beings. Also part of this human side are the people whose lives are saved or immensely improved by another's tragedy.

The Gift

The two sides of this story — the loss of a life and the giving of a life — are told beautifully by Tara and Todd Storch in their book, “Taylor's Gift.” They share the story of the loss of their 14-year-old daughter, Taylor, in a skiing accident and the donation of her organs. Through their words you feel the indefinable grief that accompanies the loss of a child, and a view of the hospital and the medical process from a perspective that physicians typically don't have. As the father of a 13-year-old daughter, it was a tough read and required a lot of Kleenex.

The Storches also shared the stories of the individuals who received Taylor's organs. Their emotional and spiritual journey getting to know the recipients depicted how their daughter lives on through them. There was the diabetic cowboy who received Taylor's kidney and pancreas ... the nurse with two young boys who received Taylor's

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heart ... the young man with renal failure who dreamed of bike riding and who received a kidney ... and the young girl with intractable headaches, eye pain and vision loss who was given Taylor's corneas. But the donations did more than alleviate their medical conditions; they provided the gift of freedom for the recipients to go where they want and accomplish their goals. They received the gift of watching their children grow and the gift of being independent. Organ donation isn't just the gift of life but the gift of living a complete life. That was Taylor's gift.

The Numbers

According the US Department of Health and Human Services, more than 113,000 people are on the organ transplant list awaiting a donor, and a person is added to that list every 10 minutes. Over 11,000 of those awaiting transplant are in Texas. And,

while nationally 79 people receive an organ transplant each day, 18 people die per day waiting for one.

In preparation for writing this, I spoke with Todd Storch, who has become an ardent supporter of organ donation. He and his wife started Taylor's Gift Foundation to educate the public and promote donor registration, asking individuals to register to be an organ donor and “outlive yourself.” He explained the great disconnect between people's support of organ donation and their registering as a donor. Although nine out of 10 people believe in organ donation, most of those able to register have not done so. Only 7 percent of eligible Texans are registered organ donors. I have been told that due to efforts of the Texas Department of Public Safety through the DMV and groups like Donate Life and Taylor's Gift, the registration in Texas is now above 20 percent. However, I have not been able to document that statistic. This pales in comparison to a national average of about 40 percent of citizens over 18 years old, ranking Texas an embarrassingly 49th in the country in 2011, according to the Donate Life America Annual Report Card.

He explained some reasons for this disparity. First, it is human nature (at least in our culture) to avoid thoughts and talk of death and our own mortality. Therefore, people tend to put off conversations with family about their wishes and the process of registering as organ donors. Second, misinformation prevails about organ procurement, such as the fear that physicians will not do everything to save a patient's life if they know the patient is a donor. Many religious misconceptions persist, although most major religions support organ donation.

Another major factor for Texas' low registration rate is people's mistaken belief that they already are registered. In 2007 when Texas moved to an Internet database, the system purged many registrants, so it is critical that you confirm your registration. Each state runs its own registry. In Texas, Donate Life Texas is a nonprofit organization that is contracted by the state to maintain the registry and educate Texans about the benefits of organ donation.

(Note: This organization officially is called the Glenda Dawson Donate Life Texas, named after the kidney transplant recipient and state representative who led the effort to create the registry.) You can register or confirm your registration at donatelifetexas.org. It takes only a minute. The state registration lists are shared with and accessible only by the national organ procurement organization, United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS), which maintains a centralized database.

When a deceased donor is identified, the hospital contacts Southwest Transplant Alliance, our local organ procurement organization. A transplant coordinator communicates with the UNOS computer network to generate a rank list of potential recipients based on compatibility tests such as blood type, antigen and tissue matching, length of time on the list, degree of urgency (for some organs), immune status, and distance between donor and recipient. A single donor can save as many as eight lives and, with tissue donation, can make life better for a whole lot more.

April is National Donate Life month. You can take just a few simple actions and make a critical difference in so many lives. Take the time to register or confirm your registration. Have that difficult conversation with your family, and educate your friends and patients.

Todd Storch compares organ donation to life insurance. The contemplation and purchase of life insurance is difficult, but you buy it — not for yourself, but for the benefit of your survivors. Like life insurance, organ donation provides for your survivors, but there are no premiums.

I miss my friend Mike, but I am comforted by the thought of him “outliving himself” through his organs. **DMJ**



Dedicated to my friend Mike May, his family, and the people who are alive and living a better life from his gift.