



## Is Donation Right for My Family?

*by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.*

### **What is Brain Death?**

Brain death means there is no blood flow or oxygen to the brain and that the brain is no longer functioning in any capacity and never will again. The person cannot breathe without assistance, has no pupil response to light and no response to pain. Failure of many organs begins to occur soon after brain death.

Because the heart has its own “pacemaker,” however, it will continue to beat as long as it has oxygen. Respiratory support equipment supplies oxygen and keeps the heart beating.

Once a patient is brain dead, he or she is dead. The brain will never recover. But during a short time after brain death, while a respirator keeps the heart beating, some of the patient’s organs and tissues may be recovered for transplant.

People who have died what is termed a “cardiac” death cannot donate organs but may still be tissue and eye donors.

### **Both Organs and Tissues May Be Donated**

The heart, liver, lungs, pancreas, kidneys, heart valves, corneas, bones, skin, tendons and ligaments can be donated. The lives of several people can be saved or enhanced through the donations of just one patient.

### **If You Decide to Donate**

If your family decides to give permission for organ and tissue donation, you will first be given an opportunity to say goodbye to your loved one. Use these minutes to hold and touch the body of the person you have loved one final time.

The organ procurement team will then evaluate the patient as a donor and blood samples will be taken for the matching process. When recipients are located, organs and tissues will be removed by a team of surgeons and a specialist trained in organ recovery. The entire process may take between 10-30 hours.



The recovery of organs and tissue is a surgical procedure and takes place in a hospital operating room. The person donating is cared for respectfully throughout the entire procedure.

## **How Donation Affects the Funeral**

Because the recovery of organs and tissue is a surgical procedure, an incision or incisions will be made. However, the incisions are typically small and will be covered with clothing for the funeral. You may still have an open casket visitation or funeral if you wish. If you should decide donation is right for you, you will want to consider what clothing would be best for an open casket viewing.

You may want to let others know that your loved one was a donor by including this information in the obituary, the funeral program or the eulogy. Ask your funeral director for ideas.

## **How Donation May Affect Your Grief Journey**

Families of potential organ and tissue donors typically experience the sudden, often traumatic, death of someone loved. For all families the death is senseless. Some families must also cope with the knowledge that death resulted from the violent act of another or a self-inflicted wound.

The unique circumstances surrounding the catastrophic injury that led to brain death creates special needs for these families. Given no time to prepare and often little experience coping with such devastating news, donor families are in need of immediate and ongoing support.

Acknowledging the reality of the death is often complicated by the very nature of the death—brain death. A previously healthy person now lies motionless in a hospital bed with vital signs, yet a family is asked to comprehend and accept the irreversible nature of the injury and finality of the situation. A family may desire time with the body and reassurance that all medical treatment options have been exhausted.

For many grieving families, the decision to donate organs is a helpful way to give meaning to a senseless loss. Family members have told me on many occasions that the most positive aspect of their painful grief experience has been knowing that some other family has been brought comfort because of their loved one's gift. While recognizing this comfort, remember that it is always bittersweet comfort, and does not take away the pain of the grief that results from the death.



## **If You're Faced with the Decision Right Now**

No one should rush or pressure you into the decision to donate. However, you should be aware of time constraints that might prevent you from donating certain organs or tissues if too much time elapses.

Take the time to talk among yourselves, openly and honestly, about your feelings about donation. Consider what the dying person would have wanted. Listen to what your heart and mind are telling you to do.

The United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS) website ([www.unos.org](http://www.unos.org)) provides good information on national statistics, legislation, and policy on donation. For information specifically pertaining to tissue and eye donation, the American Association of Tissue Banks and the Eye Bank Association of America would be useful resources. Additionally, the National Kidney Foundation Donor Family Council has a variety of resources specifically for donor families at (800) 622-9010 or [www.kidney.org](http://www.kidney.org).