

Myths & Misconceptions

MYTHS ABOUT DONATION

One of the reasons for the donor shortage in this country is the many myths and misconceptions clouding the topic, particularly among those who have not personally encountered transplant recipients or family members of donors. Rumours, myths and misunderstandings about organ donation and transplantation are widespread. Since organ transplantation cannot succeed without the majority participation and support of the community, these urban legends are dangerous. They have prevented full support for donation and led to the death of people who might otherwise be currently leading productive and happy lives.

ADVICE ON HOW TO DEAL WITH MYTHS

If you hear a myth or receive a myth on your e-mail about organ donation or transplantation, **DO NOT PASS IT ON!** You should try to verify the story with the originator, or try to check it with the authorities. You will probably find it's not true.

Here are examples of common myths about organ donation/transplantation:

Myth No. 1

"If I agree to donate my organs, my doctor or the emergency room staff won't work as hard to save my life. They'll remove my organs as soon as possible."

Reality

When you go to the hospital for treatment, doctors focus on saving **your** life — not somebody else's. You'll be seen by a doctor whose specialty most closely matches your particular emergency. The doctor in charge of your care has nothing to do with

"Organ donation is against my religion."

Reality

Organ donation is consistent with the beliefs of most religions. This includes Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam and most branches of Judaism. If you're unsure of, or uncomfortable with, your faith's position on donation, ask a member of your clergy.

Myth No. 3

"I'm under age 18. I'm too young to make this decision."

Reality

You are not too young to make this decision, but until you are 18, you cannot register your legal consent, you can only register your intent as a 16-17 year old. Have this discussion with your parents.

Myth No. 4

"I want my loved one to have an open-casket funeral. That can't happen if his or her organs or tissues have been donated."

Reality

Organ and tissue donation doesn't interfere with having an open-casket funeral. The donor's body is clothed for burial, so there are no visible signs of organ or tissue donation. For eye donation, an artificial eye is inserted, the lids are closed, and no one can tell the difference. For bone donation, artificial bone is inserted where bone is removed. With skin donation, a very thin layer of skin similar to a sunburn peel is taken from the donor's back. Because the donor is clothed and lying on his or her back in the casket, no one can see a difference.

Myth No. 5

"I'm too old to donate."

Reality

There's no defined cut-off age for donating organs. Organs have been successfully transplanted from donors in their 70s and 80s. The decision to use your organs is based on strict medical criteria, not age. Don't disqualify yourself prematurely. Let the doctors decide at your time of death whether your organs and tissues are suitable for transplantation.

Myth No. 6

"I'm not in the greatest health, and my eyesight is poor. Nobody would want my organs or tissues."

Reality

Very few medical conditions automatically disqualify you from donating organs. The decision to use an organ is based on strict medical criteria. It may turn out that certain organs are not suitable for transplantation, but other organs and tissues may be fine. Don't disqualify yourself prematurely. Only medical professionals at the time of your death can determine whether your organs are suitable.

Myth No. 7

"Rich, famous and powerful people always seem to move to the front of the line when they need a donor organ. There's no way to ensure that my organs will go to those who've waited the longest or are the neediest."

Reality

The rich and famous aren't given priority when it comes to allocating organs. It may seem that way because of the amount of publicity generated when celebrities receive a transplant, but they are treated no differently to anyone else.

Myth No. 8

"My family will be charged if I donate my organs."

Reality

There is no charge to the donor or the donor's family for any part of organ or tissue donation.

Myth No. 9

"I heard about this guy who went to a party, and woke up the next morning in a bathtub full of ice. His kidneys were stolen for sale on the black market!"

Reality

There is no documented case of this ever happening. In Australia and the developed world, it is illegal to buy and sell organs. The process of matching donors with recipients, the need for highly skilled medical professionals to perform the surgery, and the need for modern medical facilities and support necessary for transplantation make it highly unlikely that this system could be duplicated in secrecy.

Myth No. 10

"If I'm in an accident and the hospital knows I want to be a donor, the doctors won't try to save my life!"

Reality

The medical team treating you is completely separate from the transplant team. Transplant teams are only notified of the possibility of donation AFTER a person has been declared legally dead and the family have agreed to donation.

Myth No. 11

"If I donate, I would worry that the recipient and/or the recipient's family would discover my identity and cause more grief for my family."

Reality

Health professionals who are involved in organ and tissue donation and transplantation are bound by the law forbidding the disclosure of identifying information. They cannot and do not facilitate donor families and recipients meeting. All correspondence between donor families and recipients is sent to the relevant Donor or Recipient Coordinators where it is screened for identifying information and then mailed on. This ensures no contact details between donor families and the recipients are disclosed to either party. There have been occasions where donor families and recipients have found each other and met. These meetings have been organised by the

individuals involved. The health professionals involved in their cases did not facilitate the disclosure of information and the subsequent meeting.

Myth No. 12

"I heard that they take everything, even if I only want to donate my eyes."

Reality

You may specify which organs you want donated. Your wishes will be followed.

Myth No. 13

"People can recover from brain death."

Reality

People can recover from comas, but not brain death. Coma and brain death are not the same. No-one has ever recovered after the diagnosis of brain death using the documented neurological criteria.

Myth No. 14

"Minorities should refuse to donate because organ distribution discriminates by race."

Reality

Organs are matched by factors, including blood group and tissue typing, which can vary by race, but this does not preclude them from receiving transplants.

Myth No. 15

"I have registered on my driver's licence to be an organ donor."

Reality

It is important that you register your consent to be an organ and tissue donor on the Australian Organ Donor Register -- it is the only national register for organ and tissue donation for transplantation after death. Even if you have previously expressed an intention to donate organs or tissue, for example by ticking a box on a driver's license renewal or registering elsewhere, it is very important that you update your details and register your consent to be a donor on the Australian

Organ Donor Register. Then, you can be confident that your consent will be recognised should the circumstances arise when you may be able to donate organs or tissues.

Myth No. 16

"Organ recipients acquire their donor's characteristics."

Reality

It has never been scientifically proven that transplant recipients acquire their donor's characteristics. Although some transplant recipients believe they have acquired their donor's characteristics, this phenomenon has never been proven. Transplanted organs do not have a "memory" so there may be other explanations for why recipients gain interest in activities in which they previously had no interest. Some believe the power of suggestion or the experience of the illness and transplant might have an effect on the recipient.

Myth No. 18

"I don't need to tell my family that I want to be a donor because I have it written in my will."

Reality

By the time your will is read, it will be too late to recover your organs. Telling your family now that you want to be an organ and tissue donor and registering as a donor are the best ways to ensure your wishes are carried out.

Myth No. 19

"I am an organ recipient, can I be a donor?"

Reality

This depends on the circumstance of the patient's cause of death and whether the death is related to the recipient organ. Under these circumstances, an organ recipient may be a donor of any eligible organs, including a healthy recipient organ. Organ recipients cannot be tissue donors due to the immunosuppressive drugs that are taken after the transplant and their harm caused to the body.
