

The Role of the Physician in the Organ Donation Process

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For obvious reasons, physicians have had a major role in the organ donation process in Hawaii. Starting from the recovery and transplantation of kidneys in the early 1960's by Dr Livingston Wong and continuing in 1987 with the formation of the organ procurement organization to serve the state of Hawaii independently of hospital affiliation, physicians such as Dr Wong have been instrumental in the organ donation process. Today, the organization that Dr Wong helped to establish is known as the Organ Donor Center of Hawaii and in September 1997 it will celebrate ten years of service.

Starting with a part-time staff and an occasional organ donor, the organization now has a half dozen full-time staff with several part-time staff to manage the recoveries of 12 organ donors annually. The scope of annual activities for the organization has broadened to include 18 tissue donors and over 60 eye donors (in collaboration with the Hawaii Lions Club Eye Bank).

The role of the physician continues to be pivotal in this process. For example, the physician has the responsibility to declare death and inform the family. For a doctor trained to save lives, losing a patient is often an emotional defeat. It is at this point, where medicine can offer no further hope for the family, that the physician must open a door of opportunity for the surviving family. The "continuum of care" has progressed from patient to family and the doctor has an important role to play. Just when there is nothing else left to offer but sympathy, the physician can offer the family one more option. The family has the final option, a final choice that only they can make for the deceased patient, the option of donation.

While doctors are very well-trained in a variety of disciplines and specialties, the role of approaching the family for consent must go to a trained facilitator. Studies have documented the greater success of trained personnel to secure consent from potential donor families

than physicians are able to obtain. These facilitators may be an Organ Donor Center coordinator or a "designated requestor" at a hospital who has been specially trained to approach bereaved families. Approaching a family without training may even expose the facilitator to some legal liability.

The opportunity to exercise the "right" of donation is one that cannot be denied to a surviving family. Some medical professionals, acting on what they thought were the family's best interests, have failed to present the option of donation and have found themselves in lawsuits.

While all the cases have been settled out-of-court, it is obvious that hospital staff and physicians should refer all deceased or potential donors to the organ procurement organization for disposition. Of course, many patients will fail to meet the medical criteria for acceptability. But those criteria change with time and formerly unacceptable potential donors from a few years ago are routinely accepted today. The Organ Donor Center provides a valuable insulating service to physicians by acting as the referral organization that accepts or declines a potential donor. The doctor never has to make a decision regarding acceptability and will never have to deny the donation option to a surviving family.

Since 1987, the Organ Donor Center of Hawaii has facilitated the recoveries of almost 200 organ and tissue donors. The families of those donors made important decisions to share the lives of their deceased and thus spare the loss of life, or the loss of the quality of life, for another family. Like the recipient families, donor families have benefited from donation as well because they are able to find meaning in their personal and tragic loss. Typical of what donor families feel is this statement from a donor mom, "He donated everything. Knowing how many people he helped has really been a

comfort to us. It is possible to bring some good out of death. Our loved ones are lost to us for now, but we will see them again. His name will go on and on in a positive way."

Physicians were part of that donation process and they will continue to have an important role in the donation process in the future by (1) declaring death, (2) informing the family and (3) leaving the option of donation open.



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