

Paediatric Organ Donation

Have you ever thought how lucky you are with the early morning chaos of getting your children up, giving them breakfast and getting them to school on time with the right gym kit and swimming bag before dashing off to work or getting to the supermarket?

feature

Sometimes when the same daily routine threatens to jeopardise my sanity, I think of all those families imprisoned in hospitals with a sick child - families who would give anything to live a normal life. The parents of these children might have other siblings at home whom they haven't seen for weeks and whose grandparents, friends or relatives are trying to provide what really only mummy and daddy can. I look at my sleeping children and, whilst I know they are not perfect by any means, I thank heaven for their health.

Some of these very sick children are waiting for a heart, lung, liver, kidney or small bowel transplant. Many will die before ever being offered an organ or more to the point, a chance of survival. Organ donation and transplantation is their only hope, but donation rates are static and the greatest shortage of available organs is for children. Children come in all shapes and sizes and it is important that those waiting for a transplant are offered an organ that matches them.

Lost opportunities

Although sadly many children in the UK died last year from various causes, there were only 57 child donors. One of the reasons for this shortage is that at the time of a child's death, hospital staff do not feel able to discuss organ donation given the grief the family is going through. These understandably distraught parents cannot begin to think about the prospect of organ donation and so the small window of opportunity is lost.

For this reason, I implore people to think about organ donation now. Having been in the position

of coordinating many organ donations and having the sad privilege of caring for these bereaved families I am all too humbled by their bravery and selflessness at such a tragic time and I know no one in the medical profession who would abuse this. Every donor is treated with the utmost dignity and respect.

Tell someone

Once you have made your decision - either way - then tell someone. Many people make no formal declaration in which case the law looks to the next of kin for consent. Parents who are faced with this decision may know what their child would have wanted whilst others may not.

I do know that families who choose to donate find great comfort in the knowledge that another child and family might be spared the pain they are enduring, but most importantly that their own child's death was not entirely in vain. A great friend of mine, knowing me so well and knowing what I do, asked her eight and ten-year-old daughters in an honest and gentle way if they would like to donate their organs if anything happened to them. She was overwhelmed by their receptive, sensible and positive response. Whilst she concedes that the thought of losing a child is unbearable, she also knows how valuable that conversation could potentially be.

Nothing to fear

Organ donation needs to be demystified. It should not be a taboo subject and whilst there are a multitude of myths about organ donation - all borne out of ignorance and negative story telling - I can honestly tell you that there is



Drawn by Emily, aged 6 - one of the lucky ones.

nothing to fear. The publicity and scandal over organ retention at post mortem at Alder Hey hospital which many people wrongly associated with organ donation and transplantation, may well be a contributing factor to some misguided beliefs.

Some people have very strong views about organ donation - for or against. Whatever your views are, I can assure you they will be respected and you will receive an enormous amount of support either way. I personally believe that we all have an obligation to help and care for others and would ask you this: If your child's only chance of survival was a transplant, how desperately would you be silently praying for a donor?

Emma Leegood
emma.leegood@kingsch.nhs.uk
Donor Transplant Coordinator
South Thames Transplant Coordination
Service 020 8299 4648
Join the NHS donor register
Organ donor line: 0845 60 60 400
www.uktransplant.org.uk