

Imagine you have suffered the loss of loved one. As the grief overwhelms you, you try to understand why this has happened; what good can come from such a tragedy? After a sudden death such as this, many families fail to realize that much good can come from this painful experience. For example in the case of brain death, or the irreversible loss of all brain functions, life giving organs can be donated to those desperately in need. Because the need for organ donation is so severe, communities need to make a greater effort to create awareness, dispel myths, and educate on the importance of registering as an organ donor.

According to the Tennessee Donor Service (TDS), in Tennessee alone there are 2,900 people waiting to receive life-saving organ transplants. This is a tremendous problem both in this state and nationwide. The TDS says, “The total number of patients [nationwide] waiting for an organ transplant today numbers more than 120,000. Over 670 of them are 5 years old or younger. The waiting list for organ transplants is growing at the rate of 4,000 per month. Another name is added to the waiting list every 10 minutes. On average, twenty two people die every day in the U.S. while awaiting a lifesaving organ transplant.” And yet, despite this massive loss of life, only 399 individuals in Tennessee donated one or more organs in 2015. (Goila & Pawar, 2009) This is an especially great issue in the Mid-South because of the large minority communities surrounding Memphis. An article for the Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy details the lack of organ registration amongst minority populations. It states that 35.6% of minorities need an organ transplant and yet only 21.9% will ever receive the organ they need. It goes on to say, “the factors that hinder the organ donation include lack of awareness on the need for organ donation with their respective communities, religious myths and

misconceptions, and mistrust of the medical system.” (Moore, 2007, pg. 17-32) This lack of awareness can be easily solved through various means.

The best way to solve this problem is to simply bring attention to it. Most often when there is a tragedy families are so absorbed by grief that they don't consider the opportunity to give. The Tennessee Donor Service offers educational programs at high schools and colleges in the area as students are often very interested in donation. Educational programs like these have been proven to be very effective in raising the percentage of registered organ donors and should be common amongst schools. According to the Journal of Behavioral Medicine, a study conducted with a group of college students shows the impact of such education programs. They concluded, “compared to the control group, the experimental group was more willing to donate a next-of-kin's organs and take action to become an organ donor. We tentatively conclude that providing information about potential organ recipients increases the willingness of college students to become organ donors.” (Singh, 2002, pg. 469-476) But these programs do not just apply to young people. In 1978 a program was started in Washington D.C. to improve community education concerning organ donation. This study, from the Journal of the American College of Surgeons, showed a dramatic increase in minority donor registration. In fact, from 1990 to 2008, donation percentages amongst minorities doubled and African-American donors quadrupled. (Callender, 2010, pg. 708-715)

Besides just education, something as simple as changing your Facebook status to say you are a registered donor has been shown to have a great impact. In May 2012, Facebook announced an organ donor initiative that allowed users to update their profile to reflect their decision to be donors. In the American Journal of Transplantation this action from the social media giant was

described as a great success. “On the first day of the initiative, there were 13,012 new online donor registrations across the 44 states for which data were available, representing a 21.2- fold increase over the baseline daily registration rate of 616...The total number of new registrations over the 13-day study period was 39,818, which was 32,958 more than would have been expected from the baseline registration rate.” (Cameron, 2013, pg. 2059-2026) If the nationwide number of registrations increased by nearly 33,000 in only 13 days, the same benefits could be gained on a smaller scale in our community. These informative actions are very low cost and are proven more effective than drastic measures such as a tax deductible for registering. Educational programs and presentations at local schools are provided by volunteers and Facebook statuses can be used as a powerful, free ad to promote this cause. Altruism is contagious and can easily be spread by one individual witnessing another acting out of selfless kindness. You can make a major impact on your community in the following ways: registering as a donor, encouraging others to do the same by publishing your decision on social media, and advocating for organ donation education programs at your local school.

But this issue goes beyond merely registering for a government run program. Not only can your action potentially save dozens of lives, it can provide emotional healing to the loved ones you leave behind. Many lives are at stake and you have an opportunity to give back to those who have little hope. You have a chance to choose to save the lives of moms and dads, children, and the elderly. This comes at no cost to you or your family and can even provide emotional comfort for your loved ones as they can find peace in a final act of kindness. They can take comfort that even through death, life can be given to many others.

It has been proposed to open the organ black market to give incentive for transplants. However, there is considerable evidence that providing monetary compensation for organs is not effective and creates many ethical issues. Even adding a tax write off for registering has not considerably increased the percentage of registered donors. Massachusetts General Hospital's Dr. Atheendar Venkataramani said, "The tricky thing in the U.S. is that there is an ethical resistance to outright paying for donors. We need to work within the political and ethical restraints that we share as a society." (Walsh, 2012) Paying donors is not an effective way to increase registration. Altruism is infinitely more effective but only when the community is properly informed of the great need they have a responsibility to fill.

As powerful as altruism is, often it cannot alone compete with myths concerning organ donation. The Official Journal of the Middle East Society for Organ Transplantation explains in a study on organ donation education that information can overcome these myths. "Wrong beliefs about organ donation disappeared after the education. The entire organ donation rate among the volunteer participants increased from 60% to 84%... Education could correct false information and might lead to higher organ donation rates." (TU & PMC, 2012, pg. 370-375) Some such myths can easily be dispelled with just a basic understanding of organ donation. For example, a common misconception concerning tissue donation is that doctors will not try as hard to save you if they know you are a donor. This is simply untrue. In fact, the doctors saving your life will likely have no idea you are a registered donor and will not be the same surgeons that operate on you posthumously. More importantly, all doctors swear to uphold the Hippocratic Oath which states, "Most especially must I tread with care in matters of life and death. If it is given me to save a life, all thanks. But it may also be within my power to take a life; this awesome

responsibility must be faced with great humbleness and awareness of my own frailty.” (Lasagna, 1964) Organ and tissue donation isn't even considered until after death is declared because your doctor's first priority will always be saving your life. Another common myth stems from the misconception that comas and brain death are the same. However, comas and brain death are very different. Brain death is an irreversible loss of every brain function and those declared brain dead cannot be restored. According to the US National Library of Medicine, “Brain death is defined as the irreversible loss of all functions of the brain, including the brainstem... An evaluation for brain death should be considered in patients who have suffered a massive, irreversible brain injury of identifiable cause. A patient determined to be brain dead is legally and clinically dead.” (Goila & Pawar, 2009)

As a community, there is an obligation to step in and help those in need. However, this obligation will only be acted upon if people are properly informed of their responsibility. Proper educational programs combined with social pressure via media could alleviate this desperate need in our community. These steps have the best return on investment as they are low cost and have high reward. These programs will reach out to minorities, dispel myths, and promote registration. Organ donation is about having nothing to lose and everything to gain. By registering to be a donor you will leave a lasting positive effect on countless lives long after you're gone.

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