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Gold Medal winner Dr. Angus MacDonald and his family from L'Ardoise, Cape Breton ... see page 4

Asking Families For Organ Donation

by P.J. Houlihan, M.Sc.

Asking a family for consent to retrieve the organs of a loved one who has just died has been said to be one of the most difficult questions that a doctor can ask. However, being prepared for this possibility is the responsibility of every physician.

In an American survey of 117 emergency room physicians, one of the most frequently cited reasons for a reluctance to bring up the subject of organ donation was a personal dislike of discussing the subject at a time of intense grief. Other reasons cited for this reluctance included fear that the family might think that not enough was done to save the life, and a simple lack of appropriate knowledge and skills.

The Transplant Program at the Victoria General Hospital has discovered that there are several questions that a physician should anticipate that the family will ask. These are:

1. **Has everything possible been done to save the life?** The best way to deal with

this question is to keep the family apprised of the condition of the patient from the moment contact is first established with them. If they are aware all along that the condition is deteriorating and the medical team is doing everything possible, they will be less likely to think that you are viewing a potential organ donor in a different light from other patients in terms of the care given.

2. **Will the body be noticeably disfigured?** After donation of all of the internal organs as well as the tissues, it is still possible for the family to have viewing of the body at the funeral home. No one will be able to tell that the deceased has been through organ donor surgery.

3. **Will organ donation result in extra expense for the family?** Any expenses incurred in the actual events of the organ donation process are absolutely not the responsibility of the family. This includes ambulance fees should the transplant program require that the patient be transferred to another institution after death is declared and consent is signed.

4. **Will the family ever find out where the organs were used and who received them?** Approximately one week to ten days after the donation, the family will receive a letter from the transplant program thanking them for their generous gift and giving them basic information about who received the organs. The transplant program is legally prohibited under the Human Tissues Gift Act to identify the recipients, but they can say, for example, that the kidneys were transplanted into two women in their twenties in Halifax and the heart was used for a 47 year old man in Ottawa. This law also protects the identity of the donor.

5. **Will organ donation change funeral arrangements?** Organ and/or tissue donation will have no effect on the funeral arrangements that the family will make except that there will be a delay in the release of the body.

6. **How long will all of this take?** After consent is signed it takes between 12 and 24 hours for arrangement to be made for the donor to go to the operating room.



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This time frame is necessary so that recipients can be selected and surgical teams can travel to the retrieval centre. The major factor that would lengthen this time frame is Mother Nature. For example, if the Halifax airport is fogged in, it might be necessary to wait several hours so that a retrieval team from Ontario can land.

Once you feel comfortable in the knowledge that you will be able to answer the questions posed by the family, the next step is actually requesting written consent. This is not a situation of persuading or coercing a family to sign. Rather it should be a sensitive and objective presentation to the family of the option. Engendering guilt by telling them that people will die should they refuse does not allow them to make a free consent and borders on unethical or, at the very least, distasteful.

The American Hospital Association's training program recommends the following guidelines:

- D Be Discrete. Meet with the family in private.
- O Organize your thoughts and prepare yourself in advance.
- N Notify the family of their options. Give information.
- O Be objective, don't offer your opinion, don't persuade.
- R Reassure the family about their decision and let them know that you care.

A straightforward approach to the family and honest answers to their questions have a profoundly positive impact on the attitudes of many patients toward organ donation. According to physicians who have faced this difficult challenge, it gets easier after the first time.

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Menu for Success

Luncheon

Garibaldi Salad

(Peppers, Celery, Apple & Bibb Lettuce)

Chicken Madeira Crepe

Raspberry Tulip Symphony with English Sauce

Coffee, Tea, Milk

President's Banquet and Ball

Wine Service

Veloute of Wild Mushrooms

Bibb and Citrus Fruit Salad

with Yogurt Dressing

Escalope of Young Veal Stuffed with Crab and

Shrimp Sauce

Melody of Vegetable

Terrine of Chocolate

Coffee, Tea, Milk

at the
135th Annual Meeting and 24th Meeting of Council

The Medical Society of Nova Scotia

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