

HOW TO *become an organ donor*

There are currently 3500 people waiting for a life-saving organ transplant operation, but last year in South Africa, only 724 organs were transplanted.

WORDS MARIE ROCHER

Shortfall

There is a critical shortage of organs for transplant, says Philippa Douglas, executive director of the organ donor foundation of South Africa (ODF). 'In South Africa we face challenges such as cultural and religious objections, a lack of referrals and identification of donors at hospital level and a lack of public awareness and knowledge.'

Who can become a donor?

Anyone under the age of 70, who is in relatively good health, is eligible. 'You don't need to have a clean bill of health before signing up, but all donors are assessed at the time of death,' explains Douglas. 'A donor must show no signs of cancer, diabetes, hepatitis, or an infectious disease such as HIV/Aids.'

How do you sign up?

In terms of the Human Tissue Act 63 (1965), any person who is competent to make a will may donate their body or organs, says Yvonne Boden, an attorney specialising in estates and trusts and director at Garlicke & Bousfield, Durban. Making your intentions known can be done in three ways. 'You can write it into your will, or in a written document signed by two witnesses,



or by making an oral statement in the presence of two competent witnesses.' In addition, says Boden, should a person not state their intentions – either to be or not to be a donor – then, upon that person's death, their next of kin may consent to the donation of their organs. If no next of kin can be traced despite all reasonable steps, then the director-general of National Health and Population has the power to authorise the donation of a deceased person's organs.

Is my family liable for any costs?

No, says Douglas. The state or hospital will cover all medical expenses from the moment that brain death is diagnosed – which must be confirmed by two doctors not involved in the transplant operation.

Can my family be compensated for donating my organs?

No, says Boden. 'There are ethical issues which require strict control. Trafficking in organs and tissue is an offence under the Act and there are strict requirements laid down to ensure that the process isn't subject to unlawful application or abuse. In addition, there are strict provisions dealing with the manner in which donated organs may be removed, as well as the procedures and timing of such removal.'

Having doubts?

Then consider this... When Marguerite Oelofse was nine, she discovered she had

restrictive cardiomyopathy. After 10 years of pain and struggle, says Oelofse, she received a miraculous intervention – a suitable heart donation. 'I'm now 27 years old – healthy, with a passion for photography and I'm taking on the world!' ❖

WHAT DO I DO?

1. Discuss your wish to become an organ donor with your family, and make your intentions known. Although your next of kin cannot override your written wish to be a donor under the Act, says Boden, in practice consent from next of kin seems to be sought.
2. Contact the Organ Donor Foundation – call their toll-free line on 0800 22 66 11 or visit www.odf.org.za. They will send you an organ donor card to carry in your wallet and organ donor stickers for your ID book and driver's licence.
3. Get an organ donor bracelet, necklace or disc from Medic Alert. Call them on 0861 11 29 79 or visit www.medicalert.co.za.