

Donor Status

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If memory serves me correctly, I acquired my driver's license at the age of 16 and happily slapped on an orange donor sticker on my way out the DMV door without a second thought. I have since renewed my license several times (now checking a box on a screen) and continue to indicate donor status without too much consideration. After 10 years working on an acute care floor at Children's Wisconsin, I decided to transfer to the PICU. I gave lots of thought to the new patient populations I would encounter - septic children, traumas, neurosurgical cases, medically complex kids with tracheostomies and chronic comorbidities - and while transplant patients were on that list too, I suppose I did not fully comprehend how profoundly these patients would influence me as a nurse.

After 4 years in the PICU, I have witnessed much in the way of donation and transplantation. As it so often goes, my first time heading to the OR for the procurement of organs is probably the experience that has stuck with me the most when I reflect on organ donation. I had only met the family the day before, hardly knew them, and here I was helping wheel their 6 month old baby down the hall amidst an honor walk at the end of his much too short life. Having kids of my own, I was devastated watching this mother and father say goodbye to their perfectly healthy firstborn boy who unexpectedly suffered an apneic event in their car. The mother, an emergency department nurse, had performed CPR on the side of the road until EMS arrived. It was, by all accounts, a nightmare that had landed them in our hospital making unthinkable decisions. While I was a new PICU nurse obsessing over checking orders, drawing labs, and learning the protocol, my patient's mother gave me pause as we were getting ready to walk out the door. First, she asked me and the Versiti nurse to read aloud their favorite bedtime book before the OR staff prior to starting surgery. It was a sweet goodnight book and we were instructed to insert the patient's name after all the "goodnight" lines just as they did at home. After that, she thanked us for caring for him and his organs so that they were able to make the choice to donate. Those words stuck with me.

I have thought about my first donor patient and his parents many times since. I am still in awe of their brave decision in a time of unimaginable grief. Then I am reminded, as they must have been, of all the wishful patients out there waiting for that life-saving gift. It has caused me to think - think of my donor status, my family members, what I would do with one of my own four boys in that situation. As a bedside nurse, I am a small piece of the organ donation puzzle. It takes our entire multi-disciplinary team. Working in the PICU has made me lucky to witness the coordination with Versiti and what incredible support we can offer families together. It is an absolute honor to provide compassionate care at the bedside. We, as nurses, are there during the darkest times for these families. It is our responsibility to give the highest quality care to their loved one as well as act as a liaison for the family and Versiti. We care for these critically ill children until they pass, we care for their bodies and their families after they pass, and in the case of organ and tissue donation, we have helped care for a piece of them to transcend their life and save another.

The orange sticker on my driver's license now holds new meaning and has certainly earned a great deal more contemplation. Because organ donation is not just a second thought for patient families. It is an immensely brave and literally life-altering decision. The journeys with patients on my unit, whether walking alongside them or lining the hallway for an honor walk, have reshaped me as a nurse and a person. I have given a great deal of thought as to what organ donation means to so many hopeful patients and families. It is an incredible privilege to care for them, and to provide them with the time, support, and resources to think through the decision to donate.