

“What’s in your wallet?” Will Your Intentions Be Known?

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Think that little heart on your NC driver’s license makes you an organ donor? Think again! In North Carolina, only a valid donor card is recognized as a legal document for organ donation. The intent on a driver’s license is not enough. This often comes as news to both medical professionals and laypersons alike. “But I already am an organ donor,” most say as they whip out their driver’s license. As the number of organs available continues to fall behind the number of North Carolinians in need, we must dispel this misconception.

The American Medical Association (AMA) encourages healthcare professionals to promote organ donation awareness. In fact, in 1998, the AMA started the “Live and Then Give” program to educate physicians about this issue and to encourage them to promote donor awareness in their communities.¹ While physicians are uniquely positioned to talk with patients about donation, they are not the only ones who can make an impact on the increasing shortage of needed organs. Whether you are a healthcare professional or an interested layperson, you can help—share this message with family, friends, clients, patients, and colleagues.

Guarantee Your Right to Be an Organ Donor

To guarantee your wishes about organ donation are honored, do the following:

1. **Carry a signed, witnessed donor card.** You can print one off the Internet at Carolina Donor Services (www.carolinadonorservices.org), LifeShare Of The Carolinas (www.lifesharecarolinas.org), or the Coalition on Donation (www.donatelifenet/become.asp). The AMA also has a downloadable card on its web site (www.ama-assn.org) on the Organ and Tissue Donation page. Sign the card in front of two individuals (not related to you) so that they can serve as witnesses. You can even specify on the card, if you choose, which organ(s) you want to donate. This card is THE legal document in North

Carolina to indicate your desire to be a donor.

2. **Tell your family members.** Let your family know that you want to be a donor so that they do not have to make that decision for you. They will have enough decisions to make if you are ever in a position to donate; make this one for them. Healthcare providers are, understandably, hesitant to act against the wishes of family members in these situations, so ensure your family knows what you want. The decision to donate at the time of death can be heart-breaking if family members do not know their loved one’s wishes about donation. Make a decision about this issue well before this point and share your choice with family members.
3. **Show your decision on your driver’s license.** When renewing your license, say “yes” to the organ donation question. Although the license is not a binding legal document for donation purposes, it does indicate your intent and encourage healthcare providers to begin the dialogue with your family.

Healthcare Professionals Should Give Patients and the Public the Facts to Make an Informed Choice

Did you know before reading this commentary that the NC driver’s license is not a legally binding document for donation purposes? If not, that is a good place to start the conversation with patients and the public alike. If you did know this fact, you will be surprised at how many people do not know—and many of them are people who want to be donors.

The AMA publishes “Organ Donation Tips for Patient Education” to guide healthcare professionals in this important education effort.² One suggestion, for example, is that physicians choose a non-crisis office visit, such as a check-up, to initiate a conversation about donation. And if staff members talk with patients, they should be clear that they are discussing this topic with all patients at the physician’s request. Of course, if patients

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are not receptive to talking about donation, physicians and staff should not pursue the topic. Organ donation is a “gift of life,” and individuals should decide what is right for them. However, more than likely, patients will have questions. Share your knowledge as a healthcare professional to help them make an informed decision about being a donor.

For other healthcare professionals and laypeople, there are plenty of additional resources to help you get involved in raising organ donation awareness. The Coalition on Donation provides several easy-to-implement suggestions to promote donation education (www.donatelife.net/promote.html). This site offers a downloadable web banner, an e-card to send to friends and family, and a presentation kit. The United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS) offers ideas on its web site for individuals to promote donation in their local areas, as well as a reminder about the Workplace Partnership for Life initiative sponsored by the US Department of Health and Human Services. This campaign encourages US businesses to share information about organ donation in the workplace and encourages workers to sign up as donors. To learn more, simply go to the UNOS web site (www.unos.org) and click on the “Help Save a Life” link. Carolina Donor Services provides helpful information for teachers, clergy, minority interests, and employers; click on the “Special Interests” link on the home page (www.carolinadonorservices.org). And LifeShare Of The Carolinas invites interested people to contact them for speakers and to learn more about the Workplace Initiative. Additionally LifeShare has a web page dedicated to educating children about donation issues (www.lifesharecarolinas.org/kids/index.html).

Answering Patient’s Common Questions About Organ Donation

Here are the most common questions or concerns that you will be asked about organ donation and facts you can use in responding:³

- “I’m afraid that the doctors may not try hard enough to save me if they think my organs will fit someone who needs them.” FACT—healthcare providers will do whatever is necessary to try to save lives. Individuals are eligible to be donors only after they have been declared brain dead.
- “I might want an open casket funeral.” FACT—individuals can still have an open casket funeral if they choose to donate organs. Donating does not affect how an individual looks in an open casket.
- “How much money will it cost my family?” FACT—the answer is \$0. Once a decision is

made to donate, the deceased’s family bears no financial costs from that point forward.

- “What if they take my organs before I’m dead?” FACT—before being eligible for donation, several tests must be made to determine if an individual is brain dead. Only once someone is declared brain dead can that person be eligible to be a donor.
- “I don’t think my religion approves.” FACT—most religions either support donation or make no statement, instead supporting individual choice. Want to look up a particular religion’s stance on donation? Check out Carolina Donor Services’ web page (www.carolinadonorservices.org), click on “Get the Facts,” and then on “Religious Views.”
- “What about family members in other states?” FACT—states have different laws governing donation. Visit the Coalition on Donation web site (www.donatelife.net/) to learn more about each state’s laws.

After you answer such questions and provide facts, some people may elect to sign a donor card; some may want to review printed material before making a decision, and some may decide against being a donor.⁴ Even if individuals elect not to be an organ donor, you have at least provided them with information to make an informed choice.

Call to Action

At the end of November 2003, 2,976 North Carolinians were on waiting lists hoping for a call to a better life. Healthcare professionals and laypeople alike can save lives. Offer family, friends, colleagues, clients, and patients the same chance by asking them “What’s in your wallet?”

The opinions in this commentary are those of the authors as individuals and not as representatives of any employer or organization.

I _____, have spoken to my family about organ and tissue donation. I wish to donate.
☐ Any needed organs and tissue ☐ Only the following organs and tissue

The following people have witnessed my commitment to be a donor.

Donor Signature _____ Date _____

Witness _____ Date _____

Witness _____ Date _____

Public Information/Referral
800-200-2672 • 800-252-2672


Carolina Donor Services

DONOR CARD

Fill out this donor card in the presence of two witnesses, preferably your next-of-kin, and sign your name in the space provided.

REFERENCES

1. Source: www.ama-assn.org. Accessed Jan. 15, 2004.
2. Source: www.ama-assn.org. Accessed Jan. 15, 2004.
3. The sources for these questions and responses (as well as others) can be found on the Carolina Donor Services web site, the
4. You can order or download educational materials and donor cards from UNOS, Carolina Donor Services, LifeShare of the Carolinas, the AMA, and the Coalition on Donation.