

Organ Donation Spurs Health Career, Advocacy

Sixteen years ago this past July, I was given a second chance at life. I received a new kidney, and because of that generous donation, my life's direction changed forever.

I was facing dialysis at the age of 30 because of a hereditary kidney disease. My long-term prognosis was not good. I was placed on the donor list and waited for a match. Through the tragic death of an 18-year-old Minnesota man, I was given the gift of a kidney, while others received his heart, lungs, liver, kidney, cornea, skin and tissue. I can never thank his family members enough for their decision to donate his organs. Not every patient is so fortunate. More than 100,000 Americans are on an organ waiting list and 18 per day die waiting for one, according to Donate Life Wisconsin, the state's collaborative of organ, tissue and eye donation professionals.

At the time of my organ transplant, I was working in sales and would go into hospitals and nearly faint. While spending weeks recovering in the hospital at Mayo Clinic, it became clear that I had a substantial debt of gratitude to repay. And I knew my experience as a patient would be useful in helping others, so I decided to become an EMT. While working in the ER and going back to school, I also worked on an organ procurement team, which further piqued my interest in this area. Ultimately, I graduated with honors from Marquette University Physician Assistant Program.

Going from a "fainter" to a patient, and now to a physician assistant, has taught me how to see things from each perspective. I can relate better to my patients because I know what they are going through. I had that foley catheter in my bladder, that NG and ET tube down my throat. I waited anxiously for a transplant. Because of my experiences, I am a better PA, and I am proud to teach compassionate care to my students as a physician assistant preceptor.

I have recently finished my term as president of the Wisconsin Academy of Physician Assistants, and for my President's Project, I chose the topic of Organ and Tissue Donation. October 6-12 is National PA Week and during that week especially, I encourage you to take a look at your driver's license, and consider adding an orange donor dot and signing your name on the back, granting permission to save somebody's life with your pledge. But more importantly, make sure you take the time to talk with your loved ones about your wishes to be an organ and tissue donor. Would you believe that in the U.S. less than 30 percent of us sign our licenses or talk about organ donation? It's no wonder so many patients in need of organs are dying each day!

However, there is great work being done to improve donation in Wisconsin. In early 2010, the new online donor registry will be launched, and in July Madison will host the NKF U.S. Transplant Games. These two initiatives will work to raise awareness about the importance of donation and more lives will be saved, but ultimately, it's up to each of us.

With one important decision, you can give someone else a second chance at life—exactly what a generous Minnesota family did for me.

Milwaukee's Jim Ginter, PA-C, is past president of the Wisconsin Academy of Physician Assistants. For more information about organ donation, see www.wapa.org.