

Critical Organ Donor Shortage

*Family Doctors Must
Inform and Educate*

BY SHELTON CLARK

The technological advances of organ transplantation have saved countless lives. Organ donation, however, has not begun to keep pace with the technology. Each year, waiting lists for organ transplants are outnumbered by potential donors, yet only a few actually receive the transplant. Therefore, organ transplantation becomes, according to one transplant specialist, "a treatment of choice — the choice of the donor." A leading thoracic surgeon added that the relationship between the family doctor and his patient can be the most helpful endorsement of organ donation.

Dr. Harold Helderman, co-director of the Vanderbilt Center for Transplantation, said that federal laws regarding transplantation will help. "The law now requires that every hospital, regardless of size, make the request of a potential organ donor and his family," said Helderman. "This can and should be done in a dignified manner. It also presents organ donation in a more encouraging way and therefore maximizes the chance of signing potential donors."

There are other factors which potential donors may not know. "It's important to tell patients that becoming a donor doesn't cost anything. The cost is picked up by the hospital performing the transplant," said Helderman.

Some patients might think that they would be too distant from a major hospital, and that organ donation would be impractical or impossible. Helderman said that this, too, is a mistaken thought. "There

are organ retention teams that can get anywhere at any time. If there is a donor, for instance, in Franklin, and the recipient on the waiting list is from Omaha, they would fly the doctors here and we would get them to Franklin."

ORGANS NEEDED:

Kidney: 15,293

Heart: 1,196

Liver: 786

Pancreas: 226

Heart/Lung: 272

Lung: 80

*United Network for Organ Sharing
(UNOS) Listing as of August 1989*

Dr. William Frist, Director of the Vanderbilt heart transplant program and author of the book "Transplant," said that the relationship between the family physician and the patient is especially important when patients are referred to larger hospitals for trauma injuries. "If

trauma patients' families can come into the larger hospitals already educated about organ donation, the yield would be so much higher. No matter how much education we do on a broad level, nothing can replace the ongoing trust, the one-to-one rapport that the patient has with the family physician," he said.

Helderman added, "For the more than 10,000 patients on the waiting list for a kidney transplant, there are between 15,000 and 20,000 potential donors. I would emphasize that it is a good policy for the doctor to keep the family aware of a potential donor situation. Likewise, doctors need to be reminded to make that request, or to know that the patient has signed a donor card or the donor section of the driver's license. Physicians, nurses and other medical personnel need to keep their eyes open for potential donor situations and keep in touch with organ procurement organizations."

"There are three points I always present," said Frist. "First, transplantation is effective therapy. Ninety percent of all heart patients return to a normal life. Second, there is a critical shortage. Third, it is our duty as physicians to involve and educate our patients."

"Thirty-two percent of those on the waiting list for a heart died last year," Frist continued. "That statistic hits home when I consider that I carry a list of 10 of my patients that are waiting for a heart — and three of them will die while waiting."