



Dr. John P. O'Keefe

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## The Gift of Life

There is a growing problem in Canada's health care system and I believe dentists can do something about it. I speak in particular about the waiting lists for organ transplants in this country. According to the leading Canadian transplantation organizations, there are currently over 4,000 Canadians on various waiting lists for organ transplants, yet only 1,803 transplants were carried out last year. In 2006, 243 people died while waiting for a transplant in Canada — the nation with the lowest rate of organ donation among developed countries.

Like many others, I go about my daily business not giving a moment's thought about what will happen to my organs and tissues when I no longer have any use for them. Yet I was confronted with this issue in a striking manner recently. When renewing my provincial health insurance card, I was asked if I wished to become an organ donor.

Just a few weeks before, I had read about my dear friend and colleague Dr. David Sweet's experience as a multiple organ transplant recipient on the University of British Columbia (UBC) website. The article was designed to encourage members of the UBC community to consider becoming organ donors. Thinking of David, who has benefited immensely from the generosity of 2 organ donors (one living and one who had been killed in an accident), I immediately signed the organ donor card.

I have spoken at length with David about this topic and I feel compelled to broadcast his message about the importance of organ donation to JCDA readers. David has always impressed on me how truly grateful he is to the people who gave him new life when he was seriously ill.

He showed me a letter that he composed to the family of the donor of his transplanted kidney and pancreas (anonymously, because recipients and the deceased donor's family members must never know each others' identities), and the letter's poignancy brought tears to my eyes.

Unfortunately, this transplanted kidney had to be removed due to complications and David required a second transplant. His next kidney came from a living donor and, coincidentally, from a fellow dentist! It turns out that David and this colleague graduated from UBC dental school around the same time, but they scarcely knew each other. However, when David came back to Vancouver after his PhD studies and set up the Bureau of Legal Dentistry ([www.boldlab.org](http://www.boldlab.org)), they started working closely together and became friendly.

When this colleague learned of David's illness, he went for tests to see if his kidney would be suitable for transplantation, if the need ever arose. The tests indicated that he would be an ideal donor and, in what seems to me like an amazing act of generosity, this dentist immediately presented himself as a willing live donor for David. Our colleague had gained such respect for David and his work as a world leader in the field of forensic odontology that he was ready to make this unselfish gesture to ensure that David could live and continue to make his remarkable contribution to society.

While I can understand that very few may go as far as this donor, I would ask you to seriously consider signing an organ donor card and discussing your wishes with your family. If you feel comfortable, you might also consider encouraging other people in your sphere of influence to think about becoming organ donors.

I recognize that organ donation is a topic that is not widely talked about and carries with it many religious, cultural and ethical considerations. However, Canadian society is very sensitive to these issues and our medical and political leaders are working through these remaining concerns. I am glad to say that I am now a “card carrying” believer in organ donation.

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