

Organs are the greatest gift

The Age By Carol Nader - February 23, 2004

Kerry Packer knows well the value of organ donation. If not for his helicopter pilot, who donated a kidney to the media boss in 2000, he might still be on a transplant waiting list.



Yesterday, helping to launch a foundation in honour of the late Test cricketer David Hookes, who died last month after an assault outside a St Kilda pub, Mr Packer said he could not understand why people feared losing their organs when they died.

"When you are dead you're dead," he said. "If you can help someone in death that's the greatest gift you can give."

Mr Packer and fellow transplant recipient, Foxtel boss Sam Chisholm, who last year received a double-lung transplant, were among several high-profile figures launching the David Hookes Foundation, which aims to raise organ donation awareness.

When Hookes was declared brain dead on January 19, it was an automatic decision for his family to donate his organs.

"We just said 'Of course'," his widow, Robyn, recalled yesterday, fighting back tears.

"As a family it was just something that we discussed, we didn't ever want to think about it, we didn't ever want to go there, but it happened."

Mrs Hookes urged all Australians to discuss the issue around the dinner table and to let family members know how strongly they felt about organ donation if it was their preference.

"We are not advocating you have to do it, we are just saying think about it, talk about it," she said.

"If anyone knows how important donations can be it's Mr Packer and Mr Chisholm, who both owe their lives to their donors."

Mr Packer, joined by broadcaster Alan Jones and advertising man John Singleton at the launch at Sydney's St Vincent's Hospital, said donating organs could prevent an enormous amount of suffering.

"David was a great sportsman but his true memory will be in this foundation, and will be in the area of changing so many people's lives," Mr Packer said.

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- KERRY PACKER

Australia has one of the lowest donor rates in the world, with only 10.4 donors per million people, compared with 33.7 per million in Spain.

The head of organ donation agency LifeGift, Neil Boyce, said yesterday that research suggested 80 per cent of people were prepared to donate their organs, but their families often refused after their death.

Associate Professor Boyce, speaking at the Melbourne launch of Organ Donation Week, said there was no evidence that legislation to encourage donation would work. "I personally think it would (put) offside a lot of Australians if the Government was to say what was going to happen to their body parts when they died," he said.

More than 30,000 Australians have received organ or tissue transplants in the past 30 years.

There were more than 600 transplants last year, but there are more than 1800 people on waiting lists.

Last year, one person died every five days while waiting for a transplant.

Waiting times range from one year for a liver transplant to almost four years for a kidney transplant.

Melbourne chef Greg Malouf has twice been the recipient of a heart transplant.

After the first transplant, his new heart kept him going for almost 10 years, before he was told he needed another. He was on a waiting list for more than a year, before having a second transplant last year.

Victorian Health Minister Bronwyn Pike, who is registered as an organ donor, said it was critical for those wishing to become donors to inform their family of their choice.
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