

BRAIN DEATH as experienced by a donor father

My wife and I entered the intensive care unit to find our young son appearing to be sleeping peacefully on the bed. The only concern being the ventilator assisting his breathing. He displays all the outwardly healthy signs, a beating heart, his skin pink and warm to touch, and his chest rising and falling. The doctors say his situation is not all that good, the next 12 to 18 hours will be critical.

Hours pass. We hold his hands, hoping and praying that he will suddenly open his eyes and say hi. Each hour the nurses come and care for him, bathing him, cleaning the ventilator tube, bathing and checking his eyes. His beautiful sparkling eyes. Why are they so sad, where is that twinkle, why are they so empty? The expression that the eyes are the windows to a persons sole enter my mind. Is he still there? Hour after hour no change. The heart monitor shows irregularity. Medication is provided. Two more hours and yet again more medication to try and control the swelling within my little boys head.



Ben 2 months before the fateful operation.

Many people consider that one is not dead until the heart has stopped beating, but for me, the body is but a vessel that supports and sustains the brain. It is my son's brain that has made him an individual expressing a spirit for enjoying life that has made him so special to us.

I am losing my only son. He is dying. A parent's intuition tells me he is brain dead. His spirit has left, he has gone and only his body remains.

Two independent doctor's openly involve my wife and I in observing the barrage of tests carried out over the next six hours. The first of three tests involved the placing of a skullcap that monitors electrical impulses from the brain referred to as an EEG (electroencephalogram). The results are transferred to a graph which displayed flat lines except for one that showed the smallest flicker.

The second test involves a brain scan after a dye was injected into Ben. The CT scan showed us that there is no positive blood flow within Ben's brain as shown in the comparison photos.



Brain death photo illustration showing blood flow at left and no blood flow at right. © Fusionspark Media Inc.

Finally they conduct a series of reflex tests (in our absence) involving; the placing a swab on the eye, placing a throat depressor to the back of the throat, placing an ice cube into the ear, using a pin to prick the forehead. All these actions would produce a distinctive reflex reaction within an individual with an active and responding brain. There is no reactions forthcoming from Ben. The evidence provided officially confirms he is brain dead, but we had felt this was the case long before. The kindness, compassion and care expressed by all the medical staff, has helped us through this terrible period.

In our greatest moment of grief, having just lost our only son, we realise we hold the ultimate power of saving several stranger's lives by offering our son's organs for donation. We have the ability to save other families the immense grief we are experiencing. Donating our son's organs would add a further dimension to his short life and greatly assisted us to move through the dark abyss that surrounds us.

Twenty years on and occasionally I am asked whether I think he lives on in the organs that are sustaining the lives of several recipients. The response is a definite NO. We have only donated organs from his body. However, I feel that Ben is still very much alive in another sense. He lives on in my mind and those of his recipients, in the photo's that adorn our house, in the every day conversation that occurs when talking of family, of when I am asked to speak about organ donation. I am a very proud dad when speaking about my little mate Ben.

Graham Harrison, Donor Dad