



Donor Families
AUSTRALIA

Media Guidelines: Reporting on Organ and Tissue Donation in Australia

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Purpose

Media reporting plays an important role in increasing public awareness and understanding of organ and tissue donation and transplantation. Journalists have a responsibility to ensure stories are accurate, respectful, legally compliant, and sensitive to the experiences of donor families, recipients, and healthcare professionals.

The following guidelines are designed to support ethical, informed, and compassionate reporting that respects donors, donor families, recipients, and the broader donation and transplantation community.

1. Consult Donor Families Australia

When preparing stories about deceased organ and tissue donation, journalists are strongly encouraged to consult **Donor Families Australia**, the national organisation representing Australian donor families.

Donor Families Australia provides a unique perspective grounded in the lived experiences of families who have supported organ and tissue donation following the death of a loved one. The organisation can offer guidance on:

- Respectful, compassionate and appropriate language.
- The experiences and perspectives of donor families.
- Cultural and emotional considerations associated with donation.
- Best-practice approaches to storytelling and media engagement.
- Emerging issues and concerns affecting donor families and potential donor families.

Engaging with Donor Families Australia can help ensure reporting is informed by those most directly affected by donation and transplantation and supports accurate, compassionate, and family-centred storytelling.

Donor families are central participants in Australia's organ and tissue donation system. Journalists are encouraged to engage with Donor Families Australia when reporting on donation-related issues to ensure stories are respectful, accurate, legally informed, and guided by lived experience.

2. Comply with Legal and Regulatory Requirements

Journalists must verify and comply with all applicable Commonwealth, state, and territory laws before publishing any story relating to organ or tissue donation.

This includes:

- Human tissue legislation.
- Coronial orders.
- Suppression orders.
- Privacy requirements.
- Any other relevant legal restrictions.

Deceased Donor Information

Laws governing publication of deceased donor information vary between jurisdictions.

In **Western Australia, Victoria, Queensland, and the Northern Territory**, families and next of kin of deceased donors **do not have legal authority** to consent to the release of donation-related information. Journalists must ensure publication complies with applicable legislation. In some jurisdictions, breaches may attract significant penalties, including imprisonment.

In **South Australia, Tasmania, New South Wales, and the Australian Capital Territory**, families or next of kin may be authorised to provide consent for donation information to be released.

Journalists should not assume that family consent alone is sufficient and should verify legal requirements before publication.

Recipient Information

Information relating to a transplant recipient, including:

- Date of transplantation;
- Hospital where the procedure occurred; and
- Organ or tissue received, belongs to the recipient and may be published in all Australian jurisdictions when the recipient has provided informed consent.

Key Legal Principle

Legal permission, family wishes, and ethical responsibility are not always the same thing. Responsible reporting requires compliance with the law, respect for donor families and recipients, and careful consideration of privacy, dignity, and public interest.

3. Verify Information with Authoritative Sources

All facts relating to organ and tissue donation and transplantation should be confirmed with authoritative sources before publication.

These may include:

- DonateLife.
- State and territory health departments.
- Transplant units and specialist services.
- Professional clinical organisations.
- Relevant government agencies.

Accurate reporting helps reduce misinformation and supports informed public understanding.

4. Obtain Informed Consent and Engage Respectfully with Families

Where publication involves a deceased donor, journalists should seek the informed consent and cooperation of the donor's family or next of kin before publishing:

- Names.
- Images.
- Personal stories.
- Identifying details.

This should occur in accordance with applicable legal requirements.

Even where publication may be legally permissible, respectful engagement with families is considered best practice.

5. Respect Family Wishes

Journalists should be sensitive to the wishes of donor families regarding:

- Privacy.
- Timing of publication.
- Cultural and spiritual practices.

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<https://www.donorfamiliesaustralia.org/>

- Personal information shared.
- The manner in which their loved one is represented.

Families should never feel pressured to participate in media coverage.

6. Avoid Sensationalism

Reporting should avoid:

- Sensationalised language.
- Graphic descriptions.
- Intrusive questioning.
- Speculation regarding circumstances of death.
- Unverified claims.
- Attempts to identify recipients without consent.

Stories should focus on factual, respectful, and meaningful representations of donation and transplantation.

7. Use Appropriate and Respectful Language

Language shapes public understanding and influences how donor families experience media coverage.

Journalists should:

- Use accurate, respectful, and non-stigmatising terminology.
- Clearly explain donation and transplantation processes.
- Avoid language that may be perceived as insensitive or dehumanising.

For example, many donor families find the term "**harvest**" distressing when used to describe organ retrieval. Preferred alternatives include:

- Organ donation.
- Organ retrieval.
- Organ recovery.
- Donation surgery.
- Retrieval surgery.

Reporting should always recognise the humanity and dignity of donors.

8. Examples of Respectful Language

Preferred Terminology

Preferred Language	Avoid Where Possible
Organ donor	Organ source
Organ and tissue donor	Body donor
Organ retrieval or organ recovery	Organ harvesting
Donation surgery or retrieval surgery	Organ removal
Gift of life	Spare parts
Transplant recipient	Beneficiary
Donor family	Donor relatives
Decision to support donation	Giving up organs
Donation legacy	Body used for transplantation

Examples

Preferred

"Following her death, Sarah's family supported her decision to become an organ donor, helping improve the lives of several Australians."

Avoid

"Doctors harvested Sarah's organs after she died."

Preferred

"The donor's family described comfort in knowing their loved one's donation created a lasting legacy."

Avoid

"The organs were used after the body was processed."

Preferred

"A transplant recipient has chosen to share their experience to raise awareness about organ donation."

Avoid

"A lucky recipient received a replacement organ."

Acknowledging Donors

Where appropriate and consistent with family wishes:

"The transplant was only possible because of the generosity of an organ donor and their family."

"The recipient and transplant community acknowledge with gratitude the donor whose gift made this transplant possible."

"We thank the donor and their family for their extraordinary act of generosity during a time of loss."

Guiding Principle

Would this wording honour the donor, respect the family's grief, and accurately represent the donation process?

If the answer is no, alternative language should be used.

9. Acknowledge the Donor's Gift

Where appropriate and aligned with family preferences, stories should acknowledge organ and tissue donation as an altruistic act that may profoundly benefit others.

Recognising the generosity and legacy of donors contributes to balanced and respectful reporting.

Where appropriate, stories concerning organ and tissue donation should include an acknowledgement or thank you to the donor and their family.

10. Protect Confidentiality

The privacy of all individuals involved in donation and transplantation should be protected.

Journalists should not identify:

- Recipients.
- Healthcare professionals.
- Donation specialists.
- Other individuals involved in donation or transplantation.

unless those individuals have explicitly agreed to be identified and disclosure complies with relevant laws and policies.

11. Provide Public Education and Context

Responsible reporting should help audiences understand:

- The organ and tissue donation process.
- The role of donor families.
- The impact of transplantation.
- The importance of donor registration.
- Where reliable information can be obtained.

Providing context can help reduce misconceptions and support informed public discussion.

12. Apply Cultural Sensitivity

Journalists should consider cultural, spiritual, and community perspectives regarding death, donation, grief, and remembrance.

Additional care should be taken when reporting on:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- Diverse cultural communities.
- Religious considerations.
- Communities affected by trauma or public loss.

Consultation with families and relevant community representatives is recommended where appropriate.

13. Conduct a Final Ethical Review Before Publication

Prior to publication, journalists and editors should ensure the story:

- Complies with all legal requirements.
- Accurately reflects the facts.
- Respects the wishes of affected individuals and families.
- Protects confidentiality where required.
- Uses respectful language.
- Avoids sensationalism.
- Serves the public interest.

Every story should uphold the principles of:

Dignity • Compassion • Accuracy • Respect • Public Interest

Suggested Core Media Message

Organ and tissue donation is a deeply personal and generous act that can save and transform lives. Responsible reporting should honour donors and their families, respect recipient privacy, comply with all legal requirements, and provide accurate information that helps the public understand the importance and impact of donation and transplantation. Every donation story should recognise the extraordinary generosity of donors and acknowledge the contribution of donor families.