

Organ and Tissue Donation and Catholic Teaching

By Father Bryan Lamberson, MA, MDiv

In his 1995 encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae* "The Gospel of Life," Blessed Pope John Paul II wrote movingly about the new cultural climate that so often disregards the sacredness of all human life. He urged us to build up a new culture of life, with special consideration for the weak and vulnerable. Among those comprising this group must certainly be included the nearly 120,000 men, women and children in the U.S. who hope for organ transplants as they experience life-limiting and life-threatening illnesses. Consider the following facts:

- Every 10 minutes another name is added to the national organ transplant waiting list.
- An average of 18 people die each day from the lack of available organs for transplant.

In part IV of his encyclical, the late Holy Father calls us "people of life and for life," and stresses strengthening our relationships, writing: "[T]he Gospel of life is to be celebrated above all in daily living, which should be filled with self-giving love for others. . . . Over and above such outstanding moments, there is an everyday heroism, made up of gestures of sharing, big or small, which build up an authentic culture of life. A particularly praiseworthy example of such gestures is the donation of organs, performed in an ethically acceptable manner, with a view to offering a chance of health and even of life itself to the sick who sometimes have no other hope" (86).

There are many kinds of organ transplants. There are inter vivos transplants, which refer to those that take place among the living. These include donations such as a kidney or bone marrow or part of a liver. Postmortem (cadaver) transplants refer to donations given after death. These donations typically involve an organ necessary for sustaining life, such as a heart, lung, or the entire liver. They also include donations of tissues such as corneas, skin and bone.

Organ donation is covered in the Catechism: in cases where donation involves living donors, "Organ transplants are in conformity with the moral law if the physical and psychological dangers and risks to the donor are proportionate to the good sought for the recipient" (CCC# 2296). The Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care (ERDs) concur in its judgment on the morality of organ donation, adding these caveats: "Furthermore, the freedom of the prospective donor must be respected, and economic advantages should not accrue to the donor" (Part III, #30).

Where donation occurs after death, the Catechism states that "Organ donation after death is a noble and meritorious act and is to be encouraged as an expression of generous solidarity" (2296). The



ERDs further promote responsible stewardship of this valuable resource when they state, "Catholic health care institutions should encourage and provide the means whereby those who wish to do so may arrange for the donation of their organs and bodily tissue, for ethically legitimate purposes, so that they may be used for donation and research after death" (Part V, # 63). The Church permits doctors to use "brain



death" or "neurological criteria for determining death" in making end-of-life and organ donation decisions. But recently, some have suggested that these criteria are no longer acceptable. A recent book by a Catholic doctor even claims that doctors who use "brain death" criteria are committing murder. This thinking runs counter to Church teaching. When it's been determined by an exhaustive battery of tests that your brain has died, you are in fact, dead. The ERDs help guide the process of organ recovery further: "Such organs should not be removed until it has

been medically determined that the patient has died. In order to prevent any conflict of interest, the physician who determines death should not be a member of the transplant team" (Part V, # 64).

It's interesting that some folks who would balk at dying without a will—thereby leaving disbursement of their estate to the government—would make no provision for the inestimably more valuable assets of their organs and tissue. I have been an organ and tissue donor for years; both my driver's license and medical advance directives make that clear. As a priest without heirs to leave whatever assets I may accrue, I plan at my death to allocate wisely the gifts I've received from God. Family keepsakes will go to nieces and nephews; dollars will go to those who most need them, and my organs to whomsoever may be given a second chance at life as a result. The old adage is still true: "You can't take it with you." From the perspective of our promised resurrection, I would add: "Nor is there any need." Remember Ezekiel—what the Sovereign Lord did through him in the valley of dry bones (Ez 37:7) he will do for us, as well.

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Back-to-school physicals and immunizations keep families healthy

Summer is in full swing, but it won't be long before the new school year begins. In preparation KentuckyOne Health reminds parents with students of all ages, even those heading off for college, to be aware of immunization and health screening requirements.

For college students planning to live on campus, most institutions require up-to-date immunizations including the meningococcal (meningitis) vaccine. While specific policies at colleges and universities may differ, recommendations from the American College Health Association (ACHA) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggest that all incoming students be immunized before college enrollment against the following illnesses:

- Measles, Mumps, Rubella, Polio, Varicella
- Tdap – which protects against tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis (also known as whooping cough).
- Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B

For students with a history of asthma, smoking, diabetes, liver disease or immune suppression, the pneumococcal (pneumonia) vaccine is also recommended. A visit to a primary care physician can help to determine which vaccines are needed and when they should be delivered. The physician may also recommend the HPV vaccine for females and males up to age 26.

"Keeping track of vaccinations, especially in adulthood, may not always be top of mind, but it's a very important aspect of maintaining overall health and wellness," said Stuart Spalding, MD, KentuckyOne Primary Care.

For younger kids, Kentucky has a number of health requirements for school admission at various grade levels. Kentucky requires proof of a preventative health care examination conducted within one year prior to entering school, proof of an eye examination by an optometrist or ophthalmologist and proof of a dental screening or examination by a dentist. Required vaccinations for school entry include:

- DTap for the prevention of diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis
- Hepatitis B
- Hib, haemophilus influenzae vaccine that protects against bacteria found in meningitis, pneumonia and infections of the blood, bones and joints
- Measles, Mumps, Rubella, Polio, Varicella
- Pneumococcal conjugate vaccine

Another preventative health care examination is required within one-year of entry into the sixth grade, along with another series of vaccinations:

- Tdap – which protects against tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis (also known as whooping cough).
- Meningococcal (meningitis)
- Second dose of varicella

Receiving the annual influenza vaccine is recommended for children and adults, and is particularly important for adults living in housing communities like college dormitories. The flu vaccine typically becomes available in the fall around September or October and can be administered by a primary care physician as well.

Physicals for Student Athletes

For students planning to participate in sports, late summer is also the time to schedule an annual physical examination or preventative health care examination. While a sport-specific physical may be all that is required, they may not address the overall health of the individual and monitor for vaccination updates, etc.

Even for those not planning to don a uniform, an annual physical exam by a primary care physician is an important part of staying well and identifying potential health concerns.

"While many adults make well visits a priority for their children, back-to-school is also a good time for adults to make their own health a priority," said Spalding. "Seeing patients annually helps physicians develop a thorough health history of past illnesses, injuries and immunization. An ongoing health record can help us to identify potential health concerns."

For questions about vaccinations or to schedule a physical exam, contact a primary care physician.

The second annual **Park DuValle Community Health Fair**, located at 3015 Wilson Avenue, will be held on **August 3** from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. The event will include back to school and sports physicals, flu shots and screenings for cholesterol, blood pressure and glucose. Experts will also share their expertise and knowledge on the health-related topics including nutrition, fitness and personal safety. The event is part of KentuckyOne Health's mission to increase access to preventative care and improve the health of all Kentuckians.

Jewish Physician Group local primary care offices will also be offering sports physicals for \$25 and school physicals for \$65. Some insurance

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