Alberta’s organ and tissue donation rates rising

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Organ and tissue donation has become a major public health advance. Transplantation can both save and improve the quality of lives. In 2015, organ donors saved 380 lives in Alberta—an 11 per cent increase from the previous year.

Currently, more than 700 people in Alberta are on transplant lists. In Canada, there are more than 4,500 people waiting for a lifesaving transplant, and many more waiting for transplants which would result in a quality of life improvement. Blood transfusions are a lifesaving intervention for many Albertans, as well.

The need for organs, tissues and blood is a public health issue. Organ, tissue and blood donation are methods of combating this issue. Public awareness and education about organ and tissue donation leads to a greater number of donated organs and thus much better health outcomes for those in need of transplants.

Organ and tissue donations in Alberta run as an opt-in program, meaning that Albertans can register their consent to donate their organs and/or tissues. In 2014, Alberta created an online registry in an effort to increase the number of registered donors. Online registries allow provinces to track the number of people who have chosen to donate their organs. Over 350,000 Albertans have registered to be organ and tissue donors, or about eight per cent of the province’s population. By comparison, since Ontario created an online registry in 2011, 29 per cent of Ontarians have registered.

Organ donation involves the donation of an organ, such as a heart, lung, kidney, liver, pancreas, small bowel or stomach. Organ donors can be either deceased or living. Organ donations from deceased donors can occur if the donor has sustained severe brain damage, is no longer alive andhas been maintained on a ventilator until his or her organs are removed. Organ donations from living donors can occur if donating the organ will not harm the donor.

Tissue donation involves the donation of a tissue, such as skin, cornea, sclera, bone, heart valves, tendons or amniotic tissue. Tissue donation does not require the same conditions as organ donation. Tissue donation can occur once the heart and lungs have stopped functioning, and thus the donor does not need to be maintained on a ventilator. Tissues must be removed within 12 to 24 hours after the donor’s death.

Donated organs and tissues are then transplanted from the donor to the recipient. One organ and tissue donor can save up to eight lives, and improve the lives of up to 75 others.

Only one to two per cent of people who die can be considered for organ donation, while most people who die can be considered for tissue donation. A potential donor’s medical and social history can affect her ability to donate. Donated organs and tissues must be healthy. The donor must also be free of diseases that could harm the transplant recipient.

Albertans can register their consent for organ and/or tissue donation in one of three ways:

1. By accessing the Alberta Organ and Tissue Donation Registry (AOTDR) [link: https://myhealth.alberta.ca/Pages/OTDRHome.aspx] and mailing or faxing a copy of their signed, dated, and witnessed donation form to Alberta Health.

2. Visiting a Registry Agent office to register their consent.

3. Signing the back of their Alberta Personal Health Card, and having the signature witnessed.

Should you wish to be an organ donor in the event of a tragedy, an essential component of ensuring that this can occur is talking with your family about your wishes for organ and tissue donation. In order for organs or tissues to be donated, a member of your family must sign a consent form saying they have been informed and agree with the donation process. In the event that an Albertan’s intention to be an organ or tissue donor is not recorded, their healthcare provider can contact their next of kin to discuss the option of organ and/or tissue donation.

In the event of a tragedy, knowing your wishes surrounding organ donation will help your family to feel better about any decisions they make surrounding organ or tissue donation. Thus, it is important for every adult to reflect on the enduring gifts of organ and tissue donation, and totell your family what you want to happen when you die.

For more information on organ and tissue donation in Alberta, please visit https://myhealth.alberta.ca/Alberta/Pages/organ-and-tissue-donation-topic-overview.aspx.

The APHA welcomes your feedback. Comments about this article can be sent to: apha.comm@gmail.com

Sources

• <https://myhealth.alberta.ca/alberta/Pages/organ-and-tissue-donation-topic-overview.aspx>

• <https://myhealth.alberta.ca/alberta/Pages/organ-and-tissue-donation-consent-to-donate.aspx>

• <http://www.inews880.com/2017/02/14/alberta-organ-donation-rates-are-up-but-more-are-still-needed/>

• <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/only-8-per-cent-of-albertans-registered-as-organ-donors-1.3927880>