

The organ transplant journey: how the organ donation process works

(0:00 - 0:26)

Organ donation and transplantation is a complex process requiring the expertise and collaboration of thousands every day. The intricate journey begins with the generosity of one person, the organ donor. Organ donors are hospitalised patients on ventilators whose brains or hearts have stopped functioning, often due to a tragic injury, but whose organs are still viable.

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After exhausting all means to save the patient's life, the hospital contacts their organ procurement organisation, or OPO. OPO staff are trained to counsel patients' families at the worst moment of their lives. If the patient is a registered organ donor, the OPO helps the family understand the process they're about to go through.

If the patient is not registered, the OPO offers the family the option to donate. This is a transformative decision. A single donor can save up to eight lives.

Eye and tissue donors can heal even more. Once authorisation is obtained, the OPO begins working to match the organ with a critically ill patient. Currently, more than 100,000 patients are on the national waiting list maintained by the United Network for Organ Sharing, or UNOS.

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OPO staff first determine if the donor's organs are viable for transplant, and then enters their medical information into the UNOS database, which generates a list of best matches based on a variety of clinical factors. The OPO contacts the transplant hospitals of matched patients where doctors will determine if the donated organ is right for their patient. Once an organ has been accepted, the clock starts ticking because organs remain viable outside the body for only a short time.

The organs are then respectfully recovered from the generous donor. The OPO arranges to transport the donated organ to the transplant hospital to help a patient in need. Once the medical team transplants the organ, a life is saved.

The donor, a willing family, and life-saving organs are essential to the transplant journey. It takes place 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.