

## THE NEW OLD AGE

# *Don't Throw Out Your Organ Donor Card After 65*

By **Paula Span**

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Take my kidneys. Please.

Take my lungs, too, and my liver. Heart, skin, corneas, anything useful. Once I've died, I'll have no further need for my body parts, but they could prove vital for some of the tens of thousands of people anxiously awaiting organ transplants.

The fact that I'm over 65 doesn't disqualify me (or you). In fact, it makes us particularly desirable as donors, living or dead, for older recipients, who represent a growing proportion of transplant patients.

Weldon Bradshaw, an English teacher and track coach in Richmond, Va., has a liver that's considerably older than he is, for example. In 2012, an incurable autoimmune disease had progressed so relentlessly that he was in intensive care at Virginia Commonwealth University Medical Center, in renal failure, hoping for a liver donor.

He required oxygen, dialysis and intravenous feeding. At 64, he had been on the waiting list for 41 days, he said, and "there would not have been a Day 42."

Mr. Bradshaw knows very little about the donor who died in a hospital in Wilmington, N.C., and saved his life. He doesn't know if she had registered to be a donor, or if her family decided to donate her organs. He doesn't know her

name. He was told only the cause of her sudden death — a stroke — and her age: 84.

“I think about this woman every day,” said Mr. Bradshaw, who will begin his 45th year in the classroom this fall. “Most transplant survivors I know, it’s hard to put into words how much gratitude we feel.”

People even older have donated: Christine Coffee of Arlington, Tex., a lively volunteer, had celebrated her 90th birthday with family in New York. When a brain hemorrhage felled her in May 2015, “they came to me and said, ‘We think she’d be a great donor,’” her son, David, recalled. “I said, ‘You’re kidding me. A 90-year-old woman?’” A 60-year-old New Yorker received her liver, he said, and “she would be thrilled and honored to know.”

For the last couple of years, roughly 7 percent of deceased American donors have been over 65, a decline from about 10 percent a decade ago. Even at the peak, though, fewer than 800 people older than 65 became deceased donors each year. “It’s very frustrating to see people die every day on our waiting lists,” said Dr. Dorry Segev, who directs the transplantation research group at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, “and to know that older people could have been deceased donors and weren’t.” The number of living donors over 65 is even smaller, accounting for 202 of the 5,600 donated kidneys last year.

Yet, better tools to assess transplant candidates, improved surgical techniques and advances in drugs that prevent an organ’s rejection have expanded the population eligible for transplants.

“Now we can successfully transplant someone in his 60s or 70s,” said Dr. Segev. “Twenty years ago, that would not have been common.”

In 1990, for instance, only about 3 percent of kidney transplant patients were over 65, a study in *The Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* reported. By 2011, that proportion topped 18 percent. (The great majority of transplants

involve kidneys, because dialysis can keep waiting recipients alive.) In the early 1990s, only about a quarter of kidney recipients were over 70; two decades later, more than 40 percent were.

Many more transplants could be done — more than 14,600 people in the United States are awaiting livers — if more organs became available. “We’re trying to expand the donor pool,” said Dr. David Klassen, the chief medical officer of the United Network for Organ Sharing, the nonprofit organization that manages the nation’s transplant system.

A study that Dr. Klassen led last year found that 50- to 75-year-olds represented the greatest untapped potential.

Yet “transplant programs are sometimes reluctant to use organs from older donors,” he said — a policy he disagrees with.

It’s true that organ quality deteriorates with age. “Nobody’s going to use a 70-year-old’s kidney for a 20-year-old who needs one,” Dr. Segev said. “A 70-year-old kidney has fewer functioning nephrons. It will not last long enough.”

The reverse is also true: Surgeons worry about using 20-year-olds as live donors, because young people will have to live many decades with just one kidney.

But generally healthy older adults with good kidney or liver function, or strong lungs or hearts, can be ideal donors for other older adults. Dr. Segev’s personal age record for a living donor: He transplanted an 81-year-old kidney, and both the donor and the recipient recovered well. Mortality rates for living organ donors are extremely low: three in 10,000, according to Dr. Segev’s analysis.

The chronic diseases common at older ages don’t necessarily prevent people from becoming organ donors. While people with active infections or malignancies can’t donate, cancer survivors may be able to, depending on the type of cancer and how long ago they had it.

Heart disease rules you out as a heart donor, but “someone who dies of a heart attack could donate other organs,” Dr. Klassen said. Diabetics may be acceptable donors. Smokers can donate. People can donate their corneas regardless of their eyesight.

In the end, transplant decisions require thorough medical evaluations of donors and recipients. When patients receiving liver transplants from deceased donors aged 70 to 92 were carefully selected, their three-year survival rate was as high as those receiving livers from “ideal” donors aged 18 to 39, Dr. Segev and his colleagues found.

When patients didn’t meet such rigorous selection criteria, outcomes were significantly worse.

One requirement gives me pause: Donors must die in a hospital, so that a ventilator can maintain their organs for transplantation. “Organs deteriorate rapidly once circulation ceases,” Dr. Klassen explained. “Everybody’s ideal of the death at home, surrounded by friends and family, doesn’t lend itself to organ donation.”

Here, two public health missions collide. Most Americans say they want to die at home, and the proportion who do has risen, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has reported.

At the same time, the proportion of people dying in hospitals dropped to 37 percent in 2014 from 50 percent in 2000. That’s generally good news, but not for organ donation.

Still, because we can’t know how or where we will die, or how well our lungs and livers will be working when we do, transplant surgeons (and the 120,000 Americans on waiting lists) hope more older people will enlist as donors.

My driver’s license identifies me as a donor. If you’re game, but you’re not headed for a motor vehicle office anytime soon, you can use the online form at Donate Life America ([registerme.org](http://registerme.org)) to be entered in the national registry.