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Donors

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parents decided to donate his organs and

"I just thought of those organs going to waste, and I couldn't bring myself to do that," Steve Karnisky said. "As crass as it may sound, I'm aware that young teenagers who do silly things (and die) are the biggest providers."

Rich, the youngest of five children, died June 22 at age 15. Within 24 hours his heart, liver, one kidney and a kidney-pancreas combination had been transplanted to patients in need. His bone and tissue have been preserved for future use.

In recent months, Rich's parents have sought to inform the community about the urgent need for organ and tissue donation. On the weekend of Jan. 6-7, the Karniskys, along with their daughter, Rita, spoke to congregations at their parish, St. Charles Borromeo in Greece.

Father Ed Palumbos, pastor at St. Charles, said he promotes organ and tissue donation throughout the year. However, he said, too often it isn't discussed until a tragedy occurs.

"My sense is that most parishes just haven't had the occasion. Unfortunately we have, and we try to make the best of it," Father Palumbos remarked. He noted that the Karniskys' presentation at St. Charles was planned in conjunction with the first anniversary of Father Francis Blighton's death. Father Blighton, who had been parochial vicar at St. Charles, also had been an organ donor, the Karniskys noted.

Months earlier, in August 2000, Pope John Paul II promoted organ donation during an appearance at a worldwide congress of transplant experts in Rome. The pontiff called organ donation "a genuine act of love" and a means of furthering "a genuine culture of life."

According to numerous medical sources, more than 70,000 people in the United States currently wait for organ transplants. According to the U.S Department of Health and Human Services, an average of 16 Americans die per day because a healthy organ that could have saved their lives wasn't available. Authorities also say that advances in medical technology have increased the possibility of transplants - so the need for donors has grown as well.

How it works

Body-part recovery is divided into two basic categories. Organ transplants (heart, lung, liver, kidney, pancreas and intestines) often result in the saving of lives, whereas eye and tissue transplants (cornea, skin, bone, heart valves, tendons and veins) help to restore sight, aid burn victims, and stave off the loss of limbs.

Organs are recovered from brain-dead donors while their hearts are still beating. These are usually people who have incurred sudden death through an accident or a stroke, and have been taken to hospi-

tal trauma centers. Eye and tissue recovery, by contrast, can take place several hours after a patient's heart stops. According to state law, determination of death is made by the attending physician.

Hospitals are bound by federal law to notify their local donor program of all pa-

tient deaths when a donation is possible. Most hospitals in the Diocese of Rochester's 12county area are served by two programs: the Finger Lakes Donor Recovery Network, which recovers organs: and Rochester Eye & Human Parts Bank Inc., which recovers eye parts and human tissue.

Even if a potential donor has already filled out an organ and tissue pledge card, procurement officials are required to obtain consent from deceased's next of kin.

"They would like to have everyone be OK with said Toni Shields, director of critical care at Elmira's St. Joseph's Hospital and the hospital's representative for CORE, a Pittsburgh organ-recovery facility.

Once consent has been obtained, the procurement process attempts to match suitable organ and tissue with computer listings of people waiting for transplants. Blood type, age, height and weight are all taken into account. However, age and medical history do not necessarily rule out a potential donor, said Carol Rutigliano, director of professional services at Rochester Eye & Human Parts Bank Inc.

"You can actually transplant skin from somebody who's 100," Rutigliano remarked.

Donated organs and tissue may be matched with recipients anywhere in the country, but preference for organs is given the local region, New York state in this case, and preference for tissue is given the hospital from which the tissue donor came. Sex, race and financial status do not affect one's place on the waiting list, according to most transplant centers.

Raising awareness

In his address last August, Pope John Paul II stressed the need for informed donor consent. He also concluded that the cessation of brain activity is "a scientifically secure means of identifying the biological signs that a person has indeed died." It was his strongest statement to date linking a brain death with death. Medical personnel increasingly use brain death as an indicator rather than stopped heartbeat and

> On the other hand, the pontiff lashed out against research that would seek to grow human organs from embryonic stem cells. research would involve the destruction of embryos and is, in the pope's estimation, "not morally

in itself." Rutigliano said that nearly all mainstream religions permit organ donation. But even with the pope's support of this practice, she said many Catholics still mistakenly believe there's something wrong morally with the proce-

dure. 'My soul is my heart," Rutigliano said.

"Or, "The eyes are the window of the soul," added Jim Quetschenbach, senior organ procurement coordinator for the Finger Lakes Donor Recovery Network.

Religious beliefs aside, Father Palumbos said many people are simply uncomfortable with the process. "The squeamish will be concerned about loved ones being mutilated or violated. They'll admit it's an irrational fear, but I sure do understand people's reluctance or aversion," he said.

Due to the sensitive nature of organ and tissue donation, Ellen Karnisky said people shouldn't feel obligated to fill out a donor card when someone gives a presentation on the subject.

"They're not trying to force you into anything. They just want to give you the information," she said.

According to Quetschenbach and Rutigliano, dissemination of information is vital because organ donation is still a relatively recent medical process.

"The first successful kidney transplant was only 45 years ago," Quetschenbach

"Ten or 20 years ago, the word just wasn't out there," Rutigliano added.

Awareness in the Catholic Church and in other denominations appears to be growing. Five years ago the National Donor Sabbath was begun; during this interfaith celebration each November, churches promote organ and tissue dona-

Rutigliano, Quetschenbach and Shields said that donor pledge cards can be obtained from numerous churches and health agencies. In fact, you may be carrying around a pledge card without even realizing it: The form is on the back of New York state driver's licenses.

When the Karnisky family spoke at St. Charles Borromeo, 100 pledge cards were made available and all were all taken, according to Father Palumbos. "It was quite amazing," he said

As a follow-up to the Karniskys' talk, Rutigliano and Quetschenbach gave two informational sessions at the Borromeo Prayer Center later in January. Quetschenbach plans to conduct a similar seminar at Rochester's Blessed Sacrament Church later this year. And, Rutigliano said, organ donation is being promoted through a newly formed health ministry in the Webster Planning Group. Those four parishes include Rutigliano's parish, Holy Spirit, as well as Holy Trinity, St. Paul's and St. Rita's.

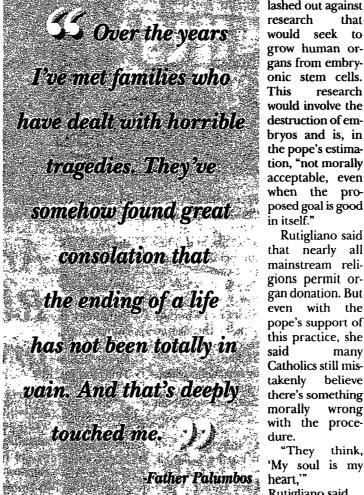
From Father Palumbos' experience, many people may be willing to enlist in organ and tissue donation programs if only the word is spread.

"Over the years I've met families who have dealt with horrible tragedies. They've somehow found great consolation that the ending of a life has not been totally in vain. And that's deeply touched me," Father

The Karniskys are definitely among that number. Though her son is gone, Ellen Karnisky said she's glad that her family's decision enabled another life to go on.

"It's like the only good thing that could have come out of that tragedy," she concluded.

EDITORS' NOTE: For more information about organ donation, contact the Rochester Eve & Human Parts Bank at 716-272-7890 or www.rehpb.org; or the Finger Lakes Donor Recovery Network at 716-272-4930 or www.donorrecovery.org.





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