Go on, have a heart – donate your organs

Debbie Reynolds

HILCRES/High pupil Matthew Legemaate is one of many young people who desperately need organ donations. "I need a heart and a double lung transplant," says the courageous young man, who was born with a congenital heart defect and has already had six open-heart surgeries. He has since developed lung disease. He has been waiting for a donor for nearly four years. His chances, unfortunately, are slim, since less than 0.03% of the South African population are signed-up organ donors. In America the percentage is 7% and in the UK it is 30%.

While there are cultural and religious reasons some people are opposed to organ donation, most people are just not educated about the process, or don’t even know it is an option.

"The answer I usually get when I ask people why they have not registered as an organ donor is that they did not know how," says Samantha Nicholls, executive director of the Organ Donor Foundation of South Africa. She was in Durban to launch the Sharks Forever Fans campaign, which teams the Sharks rugby squad with the foundation in a legacy project aimed at promoting awareness about organ donation and ultimately saving lives.

"As soon as we explain how easy it is and that it doesn’t cost anything, people normally respond very well," she says. "Largely, it is not that people don’t want to be organ donors, but that they are not educated about it.

"Getting the message out to the masses is our job, but, like most non-profit organisations, we have limited resources, both human and financial.

You can imagine her delight then when she was approached by the Sharks with the Sharks Forever Fans concept.

"We got no government funding and very little corporate funding, so being partners with a brand like the Sharks means so much to us and to awareness in general.

KwaZulu-Natal also has the fewest registered organ donors in the country – only 10,440 as opposed to 41,046 in Gauteng.

"But it’s not as bad as it seems," says Nicholls.

"Since launching the organ donor register three years ago, we have shown a good increase, from a sign-up of about 1,500 people a month to around 5,000 a month to date."

Becoming an organ donor means simply registering on the website (www.foreverfans.co.za). People of any age can sign up, although children under 18 need permission from their parents/guardians.

If you are on a life support machine and officially declared "brain dead", your solid organs - heart, lungs, liver, kidneys and pancreas - can be donated. There is a four to six-hour window for successful transplants.

If you are declared dead at the scene of an accident, for example, and time is an issue, you can still donate parts such as corneas, tissues, skin, eyes, bone and heart valves, which have a 12-hour window.

Nicholls says they are hoping the Sharks campaign will not only increase donors, but also supporters who can help to increase the database.

"There are fewer transplants performed in South Africa every year, in spite of the need growing bigger every day," says Nicholls.

"We need the resources to step up our education efforts so that we can stop the ignorance around organ donations and help to save lives.

All the Sharks have signed up to be organ donors and are challenging their fans "to join them and make KwaZulu-Natal proud as a positive contributor to the Organ Donor Foundation, ultimately benefiting the province and the country."

At the information is available at www оф.org.za. Registering on either website as an organ donor takes two minutes. Those two minutes could one day save seven lives.

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Organ Donor Foundation executive director Samantha Nicholls at the Sharks Forever Fans campaign launch with Matthew Legemaate, who needs a heart and double lung transplant. PICTURE: DEBBIE REYNOLDS

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