

Donate organs and save seven lives

Lyse Comins

KZN leads the country's drastic decline in the number of organ transplant operations being performed and many of the province's patients currently on the waiting list for organs such as hearts, kidneys and lungs might die before receiving the gift of a new lease on life.

This was the grim reality shared by more than a dozen patients who attended an Organ Donor Foundation media briefing at Gateway

Private Hospital in Umhlanga on Tuesday where the organisation issued a plea to the public and medical professionals to urgently foster a culture of organ donation and referrals to save lives.

Organ Donor Foundation Communications Director Jooste Vermeulen said the province had led the country's dramatic decline in the number of life saving organ transplants performed in recent years, which dropped to just 18 operations in 2014 from 112 in 2002.

'In Gauteng there were 178 transplants in 2002 and 163 in

When you have a family member waiting for a transplant it is like living on a knife edge

2014, and in the Western Cape there were 185 transplants in 2002 and 136 in 2014,' he said.

'The decline in South Africa is going to turn into a disaster.

'We have a burning question that we need to have answered and that is why do patients have to wait longer for an organ transplant in KZN?

'Many people are desperately waiting for organs and the fact is the majority of you will not receive an organ in time. It doesn't have to be like that,' Vermeulen said.

He said the number of registered organ donors had grown 500% over the past five years and there were currently 43 396 registered donors, but the number of organ referrals had declined.

Just 0.3% of South Africans are organ donors compared to 40% in the United States and 24% in Australia.

According to the foundation there are 4 300 people on the waiting

list for life saving organ transplants but less than 600 transplants were performed last year.

Vermeulen said medical professionals working with organ transplants were climbing an 'insurmountable mountain' and a paradigm shift was needed to promote a culture of organ donation.

Cardiothoracic surgeon and transplant specialist Robbie Kleinloog said organ transplants were the most professionally rewarding medical procedures for doctors, patients and their families.

He pointed out that organ donors could save up to seven lives by donating one heart, one liver, one pancreas, two lungs and two kidneys.

Kleinloog said there were 55 patients on the waiting list for heart and lung transplants and if the province had a robust transplant programme it would be possible to motivate for bridging medical devices such as mechanical hearts, which cost between R1-million and R1,5-million.

He added that people who want to donate organs should let their families know of their wish as it would help them to make the right decision to save lives.

Unit Manager and Transplant Coordinator at Gateway Private

Hospital, Cindy Goldie, said there were many challenges facing donor procurement.

She said many car crash victims with head injuries who could be potential donors were taken to state hospitals and were lost to organ recipients as ambulance services did not call coordinators to advise them.

'It's our colleagues who are letting us down. We face a huge challenge in that we lose a pool of potential donors who go to state facilities. Families will very seldom think 'my loved one is not going to make it and he or she is an organ donor'. They hope for a miracle but sometimes the miracle is not how we see it, sometimes the miracle is saving seven lives,' she said.

Janet Legemaate's son Matthew has been waiting for five years for a heart and bi-lateral lungs transplant.

'When you have a family member who is waiting for a transplant, it is like living on a knife edge, almost like you are waiting to be thrown over the other side or get cut in half.

'It is absolutely horrific as a parent. I want my son to be healthy and to have a normal life,' she said.

• Anyone interested in becoming an organ donor, can phone the toll free number 0800 22 66 11 for more information, or visit the website www.odf.org.za



Carol Ayres (left) with her daughter Julie Anthony (middle), who is waiting for a kidney transplant, and (right) heart and bi-lateral lungs transplant recipient Tina Beckbessinger who had a transplant five years ago

Lyse Comins

Waiting list

When KZN marketing professional Julie Anthony (34) looks at the difficult road ahead, she is filled with hope and doesn't doubt for a moment that she will find a kidney donor match.

Anthony discovered her kidneys were failing three years ago when she decided to go on a voluntary detoxification.

But eight months ago, a month after her honeymoon, the bubbly blonde's health took a turn for the worse and she had to start regular dialysis three times a week. She is on the waiting list for a kidney transplant but has no idea how long she will have to wait.

'I have only been on dialysis for eight months and some people who I meet there have been on dialysis for eight years. People need to realise how easy it is to donate and that it is not a risk to someone's life,' Anthony said.

Husband Jason Anthony said she was extremely positive although her blood type, B-negative, was one of the rarest and it is not easy to find a match.

'I give her all the support she needs. Other people just have different problems and this is just what we are having to deal with right now. We have both been positive from the beginning and have no doubt we will resolve it one way or another,' he said.

Anthony hopes to have a happy ending such as Tina Beckbessinger (35), who had heart and bi-lateral lung transplants five years ago.

Beckbessinger was born with three holes in her heart, a missing valve and narrowed arteries and before her transplants was permanently on oxygen and spent eight to 20 hours of the day sleeping, too exhausted and sick to move. She waited two and a half years for her transplants.

But now, five years later, she is living the life of her dreams and even cycled the Cape Argus last year.

Beckbessinger said she was grateful to her 17-year-old donor for 'enabling me to have a normal life and do things I had only ever dreamed of, such as walking up a flight of stairs and being able to do my long hair which I had shaved off because I couldn't do it myself,' she said.

Beckbessinger believes her life was spared for a purpose and as a motivational speaker she aims to spread the word at schools and business gatherings.

about the need for organ donors.



KZN patients Ona Mpongoma, 27, and Julie Anthony, 34, are both waiting for kidney transplants. Mpongoma, who has been on the waiting list for the past four years, encourages people to set aside their cultural and religious beliefs to donate organs to save lives