

'You could save a life like mine'

As a survey reveals many people think you're too old to be an organ donor over 55, one woman tells how she owes her life to someone who believed otherwise

By Sarah Milne

Now looking a picture of health it's hard to imagine that just a few years ago Lisa Muscutt, left, was staring death in the face.

Lisa (34), from Surrey, had been waiting two years for a double lung transplant but became so critically ill that her family were advised to say their goodbyes. It was as they were doing so that a suitable pair of lungs from a 62-year-old donor finally became available and Lisa received a successful transplant.

She had been born with cystic fibrosis, a hereditary condition which affects the lungs. By the time she was in her 20s her condition had deteriorated so that she needed oxygen 24 hours a day and was wheelchair dependent. But she admits when she heard her donor

was a 62-year-old she did have some misgivings. "My face must have shown my fears! Although I was immensely grateful, I couldn't help wondering if they would give me a shorter life span than younger organs. But the transplant co-ordinator reassured me that they were definitely the best ones for me and not a compromise," Lisa says. "She also explained that lungs are just airbags, they do not age and would last me as long as lungs from a younger donor".

Lisa knows she had come within a hair's breadth of being one of the 1,000 people who die each year in Britain while waiting for an organ transplant. While recent research reveals that 96% of us would take an organ if we needed one, only 27% of us are currently on the Organ Donor Register. It doesn't seem fair does it? The shortfall is drastic and it's one that's costing lives. There are currently more than 10,000 people in the UK in desperate need of an organ transplant.

This month a national campaign is running to try and encourage more people to sign up to the Organ Donor Register. As part of this publicity drive, the NHS commissioned a major survey to discover

why more people are not putting themselves forward as donors.

A key finding of the survey was that over half of those aged over 55 believe they're too old to be potential organ donors, a misconception which Professor James Neuberger, Associate Medical Director at NHS Blood and Transport is keen to dispel.

"The belief that there is some sort of age limit on becoming an organ donor is a complete myth," he says. "There have been successful transplants with organs donated from people in their 80s and the current oldest cornea donor was 104 years old. There are very few illnesses that prevent someone from donating their organs after death."

Thanks to her 62-year-old donor, two years after her transplant Lisa is now living a full and vibrant life and working with the charity, Live Life Then Give Life, to raise awareness of the need for more organ donations. "I will for ever be grateful to that special lady, and her family, who gave me the gift of life," she says. "Many people joke that we wouldn't want their organs, but with 10,000 people currently in need of a transplant, we really, really do."

// You can find out more information

about organ donation by visiting Live Life Then Give Life at www.lltgl.org.uk

// The NHS Organ Donor Register is a confidential, computerised database used

by authorised NHS staff on a 24-hour basis to establish whether a person wishes to donate their organs. You can join the NHS Organ Donor Register by calling 0300 123 23 23 or by visiting www.organdonation.nhs.uk



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MY STORY

'My husband's death brought life to others'

The benefits of organ donation for the recipients are obvious but it's clear that those who agree to their loved one donating their organs after death also experience great benefits.

Jo Haythornthwaite (56) from Lancashire, has very precious memories of the day she agreed to her husband John's organs being donated. John was just 58 and in good health when he suddenly collapsed and died last year. Jo described the moment she was asked if she would like to speak to a transplant co-ordinator as like 'a light at the end of a very dark tunnel'. She explains: "Even though nothing could be done for John now, I realised another person could be helped."

Although Jo and John had never discussed organ donation Jo felt that she was spokesperson to a joint decision, the last they would make and donating John's organs has given Jo a great deal of comfort. "It is John's legacy and I hope my story will inspire other people to talk about organ donation." She says: "I miss John every day but I am incredibly proud that my husband's death saved the lives of seven people."

MY STORY

'Every morning I prayed for a suitable donor'

Journalist Sarah Milne, who wrote this article, is acutely aware of the desperate need for donors. In August 2008 her four-year-old son William suffered intestinal failure and joined the waiting list for a small bowel transplant.

Sarah says: "It was scary how rapidly William's health deteriorated and every morning I woke up and prayed that a suitable organ would be found for him. I was told that the UK has one of the lowest rates of organ donation in Western Europe. For three months we went through the sheer agony of waiting for one and I knew there was a real possibility that William could die while we waited. I felt utterly helpless as I watched my son lying listlessly, as white as a sheet. He seemed to be fading in front of my eyes."

For six months William, pictured above with his gran Margaret, was too sick to leave hospital so Sarah's life was put on hold. "I am a single parent and have two daughters, Hope (now 13) and Ellie (10) so I couldn't have coped without my parents Margaret (64) and Dennis Hodgkins (80), who took Hope and Ellie into their home. Even so, I found it so hard being so far from away from the girls and words can't describe how relieved I felt when we got the call that a donor had been found for William and he finally received his transplant in November 2008."

Having seen their grandson's life saved by a transplant, Sarah's mum and dad decided to donate their own organs after death and joined the Organ Donor Register. Although her dad has recovered from stomach cancer, he believes his organs could still help others. "I've seen a few years but I'm sure there are bits of me they could use. There is nowt wrong with my lungs and corneas," he says, and he is absolutely right.



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