

A banana can kill you

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It was 6 o'clock in the morning when she was woken by the phone. She barely had the strength to answer it; she did not yet know that that call was going to change her life for ever. Just a few hours later, she was already in hospital awaiting the results of compatibility tests to see whether she could receive a kidney. Four days later, she was back home, with a new kidney inside her and her whole life ahead of her. The Irish journalist, **Regina Hennelly**, was just 24 years old when a routine medical check-up revealed that her kidneys were failing. Within a few months, she was on daily medication and having to undergo dialysis, a treatment that robbed her of 10 hours of her life. Her quality of life went seriously downhill; she lived in constant fear, watching her diet scrupulously: 'A banana can kill you.' Drinking very little liquid and avoiding salt and foods containing phosphorus and potassium are some of the things renal patients need to do.

'When your renal function drops below 20% and your chances of surviving the next five years are not at all encouraging, that's when they put you on the waiting list.' And so it was that two years and seven months went by, her health deteriorating little by little, until one day fate matched her with someone who had passed away and whose kidney turned out to be compatible. Out of the blue, this event turned her life around. Her smile returned while she thought about the miracle of the gift of life from someone who had just died.

'I woke up and the first thing I did was check that the tubes were gone from my body. In their place, there were just 36 staples. Then I knew the transplant had been a success. I know it isn't a permanent cure, but it's given me another fifteen years,' she explained to a group of health journalist colleagues and me, assembled last week at a subject workshop organised by the European Commission in Brussels to showcase the state of transplants in Europe.

The miracle of life after death

Similar stories happen every day, thanks to an effective health system that works tirelessly from the identification of the optimal donor for each serious case on the waiting list through to the transplantation of the organ under the best conditions. As one family is mourning the loss of a loved one, another family elsewhere receives the call that brings them back hope, the prospect of a new opportunity to live without illness.

Just a few minutes separate the absolute despair of some and the spontaneous hope of others. It's an experience shared by all the members of the Association for Relatives of Organ Donors (AFADA), the only association of its kind in Spain, created in 2002 for the recognition of donors. This very June, the association unveiled a monument in tribute to donors, which can be seen in the grounds of the Orthopaedic Hospital of

Granada. Not in vain, for Granada is the Spanish province with the greatest solidarity in organ donation, an admirable fact, much credit for which is surely due to Manolo Burgos and Blas Baquedano Fernández, veterans in coordinating intra-hospital transplants.

Belgium holds an annual celebration in honour of all anonymous donors. Their relatives come together and pay tribute to their loved ones. They share experiences. 'There is nothing quite like receiving a hand-written letter of thanks from the person who received a transplant organ from our daughter,' acknowledges Lia Van Kempen, founder of the association *Nabestaanden van donoren* (NAVADO) and mother of Kelly, who died when she was eight years old, in a domestic accident in February 2000. This 'thank-you letter' gesture is also an option in Spain, thanks to the collaboration of the health centres, which ensure that the anonymity of both parties is maintained, as required by law.

One third of all organ transplants carried out in the world take place in Europe

In order to meet the need for transplants in Europe, it would be necessary to carry out 170 transplants every day. Currently, 80 are carried out, and there are 86 000 European patients on waiting lists, of whom sadly a dozen die each day because there aren't enough organs to go round. Regrettably, not everyone who needs a transplant finds a compatible donor. In Europe alone, there are currently 70 000 people waiting for a kidney, 8 500 need a liver in order to survive, 3 850 need a heart, 2 200 a lung and 1 600 a pancreas.

You don't always have to die to help patients. Some patients don't need to wait for the death of a compatible donor, because in certain cases a living donor decides to give them one of their kidneys, as happened to the brother of Sofia, an official at the European Commission. Sofia didn't hesitate to travel to Portugal, her country of origin, for the operation in July 2008. 'I felt it was my obligation, to me it's an act of love and nothing more. I don't feel like a hero. I never had any doubts, although in my interview with the psychologist they did ask me to reconsider, in case my daughter needed me in future. I believe we can't let the future paralyse us in the present. We'd never do anything if we worried about what the future might bring.' Today, she leads a completely normal life with a single kidney, as does her brother; the only reminder is the scar on her body, which she sees as 'a work of art'.

The Spanish transplant model, which is in its 25th anniversary year, is serving as an example to various countries. For example, in the region of Tuscany alone, annual donations doubled following the introduction of the Spanish model, based on the implementation of procedures and ongoing training of the Transplant Coordinators Group and those in charge of it, as well as maximum coordination at all levels of health administration.