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Ciência Hoje (Science, Technology and Entrepreneurship Journal)

Monday, 24 October 2011

Would you donate your organs?

More likely that 'we will need a transplant than become a donor'.

By Susana Lage (Text and Photos) in Brussels



Emily Thackray underwent a double lung transplant

Have you ever discussed organ donation with your family? Did you know that in Portugal there are laws governing organ transplantation? Many people's answer would be 'no', because this is one of those issues that we only think about when it directly affects us, our family or our friends. In fact, most people do not realise that just by clearing up some of the myths surrounding this subject, we could save lives.

At a conference on organ donation and transplantation held this week in Brussels and organised by the European Commission, I met Emily Thackray.

It is hard, if not impossible, to tell that this cheerful person of just 27 was once at death's door, unable to do anything but hope that she would receive the **'gift of life'** as she puts it.

Emily, who is British, was born with cystic fibrosis, a hereditary disorder that affects the lungs and digestive system. She grew up with a daily routine of inhalers, antibiotics, nebulisers and physiotherapy. **'50% of my time was spent in hospital'**, she recalls.

Despite all the treatment, she had a 'normal' upbringing and was able to do everything that any other child would. However, as she got older her lungs deteriorated. In March 2005, she was put on the waiting list for a double lung transplantation and was told that, without the operation, she would probably have less than a year to live.

Finally, after 22 months of waiting, she received a transplant.

She is now married and works raising money for research. She founded the charity organisation 'Live Life Then Give Life' and is driven by the desire to help others.

When I ask her how we can raise awareness of an issue that does not affect most people personally, she replies, '**Organ donation affects us all because it is more likely that we will need a transplant than become a donor**'.

Organ donation and transplantation in Portuguese law

Where do the donated organs come from?

The tissues or organs may come from either a living donor or somebody who has just passed away. The preferred method is to transplant tissues and organs from living donors as this has a higher success rate.

Who can become a living donor?

A new law allows anybody, such as spouses or friends, to become living donors, irrespective of whether or not they are related to the recipient by blood.

What should I do if I do not wish to donate my organs?

You should register on the national non-donor register by filling in the relevant form, available at any health centre, and submitting it to your health centre.

How does the waiting list work?

Recipients are chosen from the waiting list using biological criteria such as ABO group compatibility and HLA-DR type and by cross-matching. Factors such as degree of urgency and age are given priority. In principle, distribution is regional. However, in cases of urgency, it is extended to national level. In the event that there is no compatible recipient in Portugal for the organs harvested, they will be offered to possible recipients in other European countries.

Decide for yourself

Tomorrow is European Day for Organ Donation and Transplantation (EODD). The idea behind this Day is to help people to realise that they can make their own decision about donation and make their wishes known to their family. This is important because Portugal operates a presumed consent system. This means that, from birth, we are all potential organ donors.

According to a study performed by the European Union (Eurobarometer 72.3), although 74 % of Portuguese people have never discussed organ donation with their families, more than half say that they would donate one of their organs when they die.

A third of those who say they are not willing to donate one of their own organs or those of a deceased close relative are unable to give a reason for their refusal. Of the remainder, 28%

said that they would not donate due to their distrust of the system. And fewer than one in ten people would not donate due to religious beliefs.

Despite the fact that the majority of European citizens supports donation, as is the case in Portugal, the need for transplants is on the rise around the world. In the EU, 56 000 patients are waiting for a transplant. On average 12 people die waiting every day.

The Eurobarometer report shows that family discussion of the topic is favourably linked to support for organ donation, as is the level of education.

Curiously, financial problems seem to be a hindrance as those who struggle to make ends meet are less inclined to discuss the matter or consent to donate one of their own organs or those of a deceased close relative.