

Organ and Tissue Donation Reform in Australia

The Australia's Government's organ and tissue donation reform program – under the DonateLife banner – began in 2009. Four years on, and with the ISODP international organ donation congress having just been held in Sydney from 21-24 November 2013, it is timely to assess progress achieved thus far.

Australia's reform program has involved the establishment of a national coordinating Organ and Tissue Authority in Canberra supported by a government DonateLife network in the states and territories. They liaise closely with medical staff, primarily at public hospitals, undertaking organ transplants around Australia. While a nationally consistent approach is sought, this is affected somewhat by different operating systems within hospitals under our federal/state system. Extensive specialist training in the deceased donation process has occurred and, more recently, training in sensitive family donation conversations has been arranged for numerous hospital staff. Close engagement and cooperation has been established with leading countries in this field such as Spain, Croatia and the United States to learn from their experience. Community groups, such as Gift of Life, also actively promote greater public awareness of the importance of increasing organ and tissue donation. With around 1,700 Australians on the waiting list for transplantation, these efforts contribute in saving the lives of many Australians each year.

Since 2009, there has been a 43% increase in the number of organ donors in Australia (354 in 2012 compared to 247 in 2009) and a 30% increase in the number of transplant recipients (1,053 in 2012 compared to 808 in 2009). So far in 2013, there has been a further 18% increase (334 donors to end October compared to 285 last year).

While this is not widely understood, it is important to stress that of the 160,000 or so Australians who died last year, successful organ donation only occurs as a rare event. Only about 1% of those who die in hospital each year are eligible to become organ donors – they need to be in intensive care or in the emergency department on ventilators. Last year only 790 people could have potentially become donors. After the family consent process and medical

tests for donor suitability, less than half of these actually became donors.

This underlines the importance of DonateLife and medical staff being trained in early identification of potential donors. Specialised training is also now being arranged for medical staff and separate designated requestors who collaborate together in carefully conducting conversations with families seeking their consent to donation. This occurs at a difficult time when families are experiencing grief. In 2009 the rate of consent to donation in Australia was around 54%. This year it rose to 64% by mid-year. This has resulted from more families understanding each other's donation wishes in advance, registering to become donors as well as improved handling of the donation conversations with families in hospitals. The objective is to achieve a 100% donation request rate in future and a 75% consent rate over the next five years.

These reforms will necessarily take time to implement. They require not only better training of hospital staff, but also significant structural changes within our hospitals' system around Australia.

Australia's reforms have been underway now for only four years. While world leaders such as Spain and Croatia are now achieving donation rates roughly double those of ours, they have been undertaking reform for at least three times as long. Our progress over the past four years compares well with theirs during the early years of reform. Both took ten years to embed the necessary reforms within their system. It took them many years for their donation levels to take off. It will take Australia time too.

Progress thus far in Australia has been significant and has already seen remarkable results. Much still remains to be done. More time and effort is needed for this to occur. At this early stage the prognosis looks good.