Face up to the urgent need for organ donations

By ACSH Staff — May 3, 2012

With more than 160 million users in the United States alone, Facebook has been heralded as a means to promote social connections, as well as criticized as a serious distraction. Now, a new Facebook effort aims to use the site as a force for greater good, taking advantage of the vast reach of this social network to encourage organ donation [1].

There are currently more than 112,000 Americans who are waiting for organs and, on average, 18 of them will die each day because no organs are available for transplant. A vast majority of Americans support organ donation over 90 percent yet only 42 percent are actually registered as donors.

In order to encourage people to become organ donors, as well as to help family members understand the wishes of their relatives concerning organ donation, Facebook now allows users to sign up as organ donors. Even in the few days since the launch of this initiative on Tuesday, it has become vastly popular; ten states reported having as many new people sign up as organ donors on Tuesday alone as they usually see in an entire month. As of Tuesday evening, 100,000 people had listed themselves as organ donors on Facebook, and 10,000 of these signed up directly with their state donor registries through a Facebook link.

Not only does this initiative encourage people to register as organ donors, but it may also help reduce confusion among family members about organ donation when a relative dies since there can be significant delays in acquiring organs after a death if family members argue over what the deceased relative really wanted.

Some physicians see the new Facebook measure as a potential game-changer, even going so far as to suggest that such an initiative could make strides towards eliminating the waiting list for organ donations altogether. As Dr. Andrew Cameron, a Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine transplant surgeon, says, Each donor can help three or four of those waiting | if we could get another 10,000 donors a year, I think we could have that transplant waiting list down to almost nothing in three or four years. What s more, if patients who need kidneys were able to receive transplants immediately, the need for dialysis would also be eliminated.

Even if the new Facebook initiative doesn t solve the entire problem of waiting for organ donations, ACSH’s Dr. Gilbert Ross agrees that it s certainly a step in the right direction. We need to do everything possible to make sure that an individual s wishes regarding organ donation are respected, he says. If the family strongly opposes organ donation, a hospital might be hesitant to stand up to them when a relative dies, even if it were clear that the relative wished for his organs to be donated. Hopefully, having the ability to list organ donation preferences on Facebook will help to resolve such disputes.
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