

Organ Donation Following Cardiac Death

What does cardiac death mean?

Cardiac death occurs when the lungs stop functioning and the heart stops beating.

What does donation after cardiac death (DCD) mean?

Donation after Cardiac Death means that after the heart has stopped beating and death is pronounced by a physician, organs and tissues may be recovered and offered for transplant.

Who can be a DCD donor?

A patient who has a severe neurological injury such as a stroke, bleeding into the brain, trauma or suffocation may be a DCD donor. With these kinds of serious injuries, the brain is too damaged to recover but continues to have minimal function. However, the patient will not survive without ventilator support.

What is ventilator support?

A ventilator is a machine which “breathes” for a patient when the patient is not able to breathe on their own. Ventilators, sometimes called respirators, provide oxygen to the lungs through a tube that is placed in the patient’s throat. When the brain is too damaged to recover, it can’t instruct the lungs to keep breathing or the heart to keep beating. In order to sustain life, the patient needs ventilator support. Ventilators are common in hospitals. They are both started and discontinued in the hospital every day.

What is the situation that leads up to a DCD donation?

Once the hospital medical team has determined that the patient will not survive or have any meaningful improvement even with ongoing care, including ventilator support, a family may elect to discontinue or forego further medical intervention. This careful decision includes withdrawal of life support, allowing death to occur naturally.

What happens once the family decides to withdraw ventilator support?

After the family chooses to stop ventilator support, they will be guided through some end-of-life decisions, including decisions about organ and tissue donation.

The UW Health Organ Procurement Organization (OPO), which is responsible for helping with organ donation and transplantation, will be notified. The tissue bank that is affiliated with the hospital will also be notified. A UW Health OPO Coordinator will work with the patient and the hospital staff to determine if the patient is suitable to be a donor. If the patient could be a donor, the coordinator will speak with the family about the option of organ and tissue donation.

What happens before the ventilator is discontinued?

Until the time of death, the patient remains under the care of the hospital physician and medical team. All comfort measures are maintained and care is never compromised. The patient will continue to receive pain medication and other treatments that relieve any discomfort. If the family chooses, they may be able to remain present and follow rituals that are important for end of life, such as prayers, music or inviting those close to the patient to be present.

If the family agrees to donation, what happens next?

The UW Health Organ Procurement Coordinator (OPC) will obtain an informed consent from the legal next of kin, as well as an extensive medical and social history. Some blood may be drawn for testing. This is a routine procedure, and part of the process that ensures the patient can be a donor.

The donation process will be explained, including what will happen when the ventilator is turned off and the patient’s heart stops beating. The donation

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coordinator and the hospital staff will work together to offer support for the patient, family and others who may be part of this experience.

Once the family agrees to donation, care for the patient does not change. All care and comfort measures will continue until the patient's death.

What can be donated?

The UW Health OPC will explain which organs the patient may donate. There may also be the opportunity to donate tissue and corneas.

Will our religion support our decision about organ and tissue donation?

Most religions support organ and tissue donation as an unselfish act of charity. However, you should feel free to speak with your religious leader.

How does the organ recovery happen?

When everything is in place for the organ recovery, the team will assemble in the operating room. Depending on the hospital, the ventilator may be turned off either in the patient's room, outside the operating room or in the operating room.

The hospital may offer the family the choice of being present as the patient's heart stops beating. After the heart stops beating, a physician from the hospital will wait five minutes to declare death. After the declaration is made, the family will be guided out of the room. At this point, the patient will be prepared for surgery and organ recovery. A separate team of physicians and professionals will be waiting near the operating room to recover the organs. After recovery, the organs will be offered for transplant.

Does our loved one feel any pain or suffer?

No. Organ and tissue recovery does not take place until after the person's heart stops beating and they are declared dead by a physician. When someone is deceased, they cannot feel pain or suffer.

Does the donor's family have to pay the cost associated with organ donation?

No. All cost related to organ donation will be paid for by the UW Health OPO. The donor's family neither pays for nor receives payment for organ donation. However, hospital costs incurred before the donation, and any funeral arrangements, remain the responsibility of the family or person handling the estate.

Is an open casket funeral possible after organs and/or tissues are donated?

The donation of organs and/or tissues will not disfigure the body, and should not interfere with an open casket funeral. The transplant operation is done under sterile, surgical conditions in a hospital operating room. Speak to your funeral director for more specific information regarding clothing selection following tissue donation.