

Sharp fall in organ donation numbers amid pandemic

To raise awareness, NTU undergrad creates campaign encouraging young Singaporeans to have early conversations with family members about organ donation after death

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With the number of organ transplants taking a hit due to the Covid-19 pandemic, someone who is eager to see more people stepping forward to donate organs is Ms Vicky Cheng.

Yesterday, The New Paper reported that her 17-month-old daughter Raenelle Wong, who was diagnosed with biliary atresia – a rare liver disease – at 1½ months old, was given six months to live unless someone was willing to donate a part of his or her liver to her.

With time running out, the 35-year-old housewife put out an urgent plea for living liver donors on Facebook last September.

Fortunately, 50 potential donors stepped forward, and a match was found in January.

Raenelle underwent an operation and is currently recovering in hospital.

Ms Cheng told TNP yesterday: “There are many people who are sick, but Singapore is a small country and cadaver organs are scarce.

“I understand the pain of losing a family member. Although anyone would be saddened by the death of their loved ones, wouldn’t it be good if they can help extend another person’s life?”

Under the Human Organ Transplant Act (Hota), Singaporeans and permanent residents who have died will have their kidney, liver, heart and cornea donated unless they opt out of the Act, which can be done at the age of 21.

Family members of a deceased can also agree for the skin and lungs to be donated.

Professor A. Vathsala, co-director and senior consultant of the National University Centre for Organ Transplantation (Nucot) at National University Hospital, said organ donation trends were “stagnant” from



(Left) Ms Vicky Cheng with her baby daughter Raenelle, who was diagnosed with a liver disease. (Right) NTU undergrad Yap Hsin Chen, who is spearheading the Don’t Hold Back campaign, with her mother who died in 2017.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF VICKY CHENG, YAP HSIN CHEN



2017 to 2019 and further dipped last year when Covid-19 struck.

This is despite opt-out rates for Hota being low in Singapore, she added.

Ministry of Health (MOH) figures showed the number of kidney transplants from cadavers fell from 33 in 2019 to just five as of June last year. There was also a significant drop in cornea transplants – from 480 in 2019 to just 87 as of June last year.

As for living organ donations, the number of people donating part of their livers fell from 10 in 2019 to two as of last June.

Numbers for living kidney donors dropped from 56 in 2019 to 10 during the first six months of last year.

HALT

Professor Vathsala told TNP hospital resources and beds were tied up at the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, so MOH put a halt to organ donation from living donors unless it was “the most urgent of cases”.

Most programmes promoting education on organ donation and transplantation were also put on hold.

To raise awareness and to have more open discussions on organ donation, Nanyang Technological University undergrad Yap Hsin Chen is spearheading

a campaign for her communications course’s final-year project.

Called Don’t Hold Back, the campaign encourages young adult Singaporeans to have early conversations with family members about organ donation after death, to avoid misunderstandings.

In partnership with the National Organ Transplant Unit, SingHealth Duke-NUS Transplant Centre and Nucot, the virtual initiative and accompanying video series seek to increase the quantity of Singapore’s organ donation pool.

Ms Yap recalled having discussed the topic with her mother before she died of liver failure in 2017.

Her mother had made it clear to Ms Yap that she did not want her organs donated for religious reasons.

“Having that conversation with my mum was necessary because it ensures nothing is done against her wish,” said Ms Yap.

Prof Vathsala said it is inspiring that young people are taking the lead with the Don’t Hold Back campaign, which asks people to make the decision for themselves and let their decision be known.

She said: “A deceased donor may be able to save five lives by

donating one liver, one heart, two kidneys and lungs, which could give more than (a total) 70 additional years of life to patients with organ failure.

“The families of these patients with organ failure are also the potential beneficiaries, so the benefits of organ donation are far-reaching.

“We believe that if every individual knew how many lives can be saved with organ donation, everyone will want to donate after death.”

Ms Samantha Or, whose 52-year-old sister Or Cheng Khim’s death made headlines after she was hit by a lorry near her home in Jurong on Jan 12, said that although their family never discussed organ donation, they were happy the late freelance balloon sculptor’s organs were going to save others.

Ms Or, 42, said of her sister: “She was a generous person and would have been glad to see that she is helping people.

“(Other than my sister’s four organs), we agreed to donate the maximum (number of organs of hers that) we could because that is what she would have wanted.”

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