

healthy LIVING

A HEART FOR ORGAN DONATIONS

Mychelle Harding never gave much thought to organ donation ... until her daughter needed a kidney

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

If the law of averages is correct, Mychelle Harding's donated kidney bought her sick daughter 12 years.

That means five years after the transplant from mother to daughter, almost half the "warranty" on the kidney has expired.

"The mean age is 12 years before a donated organ runs out," said Ms Harding, an Aurora mother whose daughter, Alia, lives with her father and two brothers in Calgary.

"It's like a used tire — you put used tires on your car, the tread is going to give out faster. My daughter will need another transplant in the future. But I don't have any more kidneys to give her."

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Although Alia has lived with her mother's kidney since 1998, Ms Harding explained recipients always live with the fear their bodies will reject the donated organ.

"My daughter forever has to be on medications to trick her body into believing it's her kidney," she said.

"Your body naturally tries to reject something that isn't your own."

Ms Harding admits there was a time in her life when she wouldn't have even have signed an organ donation card, let alone consider being a live donor.

"I myself didn't sign my card until it was in my family. It's easy to put something off if it doesn't apply to you," she said.

"Then, when I found out Alia needed a kidney, there wasn't a second thought. It was just, 'It's going to be me unless (the doctors) tell me otherwise.'"

These days, as founder and executive director of Transitions Chronic Illness/Transplant Society, Ms Harding strives to encourage people to recognize the



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Mychelle Harding had this card made up and signed by the health-care workers involved in the transplant, in which she gave a kidney to her daughter, Alia.

importance of organ and tissue donation.

"I think life in general is about sharing and Transitions is about sharing as well, so I make that connection. Your life is enhanced whenever you share — love, laughter, food, whatever," she said.

"I just get so passionate when I talk about this. This is my passion. Organ and tissue donation saves lives."

Ms Harding founded her organization, devoted to education, support and advocacy, with a \$180,000 government grant after dealing with Alberta's health-care system while

going through frustration of the transplant process.

Although she had an interest in medicine and is now studying toward a diploma in pharmacy, Ms Harding said the process can be overwhelming for people, especially if they have no healthcare background or don't understand the importance of being their own advocates.

"My main reason for starting this up is I don't want anybody to go through what I went through. After hearing from others, I know I'm not the only one," she said.

"I don't know everything, but I can certainly be a voice for people. I really wanted to convey to people, 'I'm here for you because I know what it's like'."

The first phase of her organization's campaign ended in 2001, when her funding ran out, but Ms Harding is now looking for community support to help launch the second phase.

The next phase will include public education of organ and tissue donation coupled with the "Being a Kid" children's initiative.

The campaign will give a voice to youngsters living with chronic illness before and after their transplants.

"Kids eat, live and breathe their illness," said Ms Harding, who plans to develop a website and a video for chronically ill children.

"We need to give these kids an outlet and connect them so they know they're not the only ones."

She is well aware of the emotional roller coaster organ donation can be for families.

'A lot of times during the transplant process, you feel completely alone.'

One researcher discovered in families where a member is living with a chronic illness, family breakdown rates hover around 80 per cent.

"A lot of times during the transplant process, you feel completely alone. Men and women react differently to the stresses. Siblings of ill children are drawn into the illness, even though there's nothing wrong with them," Ms Harding said.

"I know in my case, after donating my kidney, I got depressed. I bawled my eyes out. I wasn't needed anymore. People going through this need the emotional support of someone who has been there."

Despite the challenges of organ and tissue donation, Ms Harding believes families can thrive following a transplant.

"Hopefully, I can provide a ray of hope because I'm still smiling. My daughter is doing well."

For more information about Transitions, call Ms Harding at 905-841-9530. For more information about organ and tissue donation, visit the Trillium Gift of Life Network website at www.gifoflife.on.ca or the Canadian Transplant Association at www.organ-donation-works.org.

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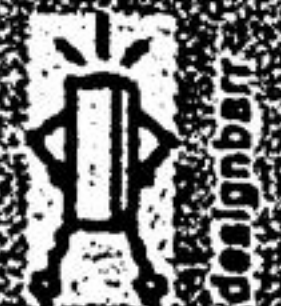
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