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NATIONAL ORGAN DONATION DISCUSSION DAY

Statement by:

The Honourable Vivienne Poy

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THE SENATE

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SENATORS' STATEMENTS

NATIONAL ORGAN DONATION DISCUSSION DAY

Hon. Vivienne Poy: Honourable senators, at the end of April, National Organ Donation Discussion Day passed with little notice here in Canada. Most of us are not aware of this issue unless we have been personally affected by organ donation. For most Canadians, awareness never goes further than filling out organ consent boxes on a driver's licence or medical insurance card. Few of us realize that, in most cases, even if we were to die and wanted our organs to be donated, many things can occur to preclude the chance to be a donor.

The Standing Committee on Health in the other place held hearings this winter in order to delve into the reasons for, and solutions to, Canada's low organ donation rates. Our rates are among the lowest in the industrialized world at about 14 per million individuals. That means that only half the people waiting for transplants last year actually got them. One in four people awaiting a donor will die before they get a transplant. That is about 150 people this year. Unfortunately, the problem is becoming more serious, with waiting-lists for those awaiting transplants increasing by 50 per cent in the past five years.

Several factors are at the root of the problem. We have no national approach to organ donation because health care is provincially run. Each of Canada's provinces runs a separate system to identify potential donors, but there is no national coordinating body.

In Ontario, for example, the system has changed in recent years so that now you express your wish to donate organs when you get a new health card. The information is then printed on the back of the card. However, millions of Ontarians, myself included, do not have new health cards yet, and may not for a long time.

At the same time, the old system of including a donor card with one's driver's licence is not as simple as it once was. New Ontario driver's licences are a single card, so there is nowhere to attach the organ donor card. People such as myself fall through the cracks of the system and our wish to donate organs is not recorded anywhere. If my family did not know that I wanted to donate my organs in the event of death, I might not become a donor.

Another problem lies with training of medical staff. Doctors and nurses are often reluctant to ask grieving families to donate

the organs of a loved one. Hospital staff are not properly trained to deal with the sensitive issue of approaching families. Even in those cases where someone has filled out an organ donation card, families must still be asked for consent. The question of training doctors and nurses to approach family members properly must be addressed.

In addition, there is not enough public awareness of the importance of organ donation. Families often do not know whether their loved ones would have wanted to donate their organs. When families know in advance the wishes of the potential donor, 96 per cent give consent to proceed with organ donation. In contrast, only about 50 per cent of families that are unclear of their loved one's wishes consent to donation of organs.

[*Translation*]

The Hon. the Acting Speaker: Honourable senators, I am sorry to interrupt the honourable senator, but her time is up. Does the honourable senator have leave to continue?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

[*English*]

Senator Poy: I thank honourable senators.

The result of these shortcomings is missed opportunities to save lives. People die waiting for organ transplants, not because we lack the medical know-how to match donors to recipients, and not because Canadians are unwilling to make organ donations, but because of the shortcomings and disorganization of our system. The organs and tissue from one donor can help extend the lives of as many as 50 people, and only a small percentage of those who die — about 2 to 3 per cent — can actually be donors. This means that every potential donor that can be identified can make a huge difference to the lives of countless people.

The recommendations of the Standing Committee on Health must be acted on quickly if more Canadians are to be saved from unnecessary death. Key among the recommendations is the establishment of a national registry to match all brain-dead patients who can be potential donors to those requiring transplants. In this way, the organs could be used for transplantation without delay.

Another important recommendation calls for training special hospital staff to deal with the delicate step of approaching bereaved families to ask for consent to organ retrieval from deceased loved ones.

Finally, the committee's recommendation to pursue a public awareness campaign is essential to improving donation rates. Every Canadian needs to know that lives will be saved if he or she makes a positive decision about organ donation and conveys that decision to family members.

During the committee's hearings, members of Parliament heard how Spain has turned around its organ donation rates over the past 10 years. Spain used to have an organ donation rate comparable to Canada's. However, the rate is now one of the highest in the world at over 30 per 1 million inhabitants. Three times as many organs are being transplanted. Ninety per cent of Spaniards waiting for organs now receive them.

Canada and Spain have some differences, to be sure — geographic size being one of them — but we can learn a great deal from the Spanish experience. The cornerstone of Spain's program has been training and awareness. Training has been

especially important in teaching hospital staff how to approach families. Now, each hospital ICU has a person in charge of organ donation. This way, the opportunity to save lives stemming from the tragic loss of one life is not missed. We need to implement a similar training program in this country.

Honourable senators, I share the government's commitment to improve health care and to save the lives of Canadians. A coordinated, nationwide approach to address the problems in our current system will save countless lives every year. The number of lives saved will continue to grow as our expertise in organ retrieval improves. We must act now. It is critical that the federal government provide funding to implement a national system of organ retrieval transportation and transplantation.

I look forward to the positive response of the Minister of Health to the report of the Standing Committee on Health in the coming weeks.
