

Our Opinion: Organ donors save lives

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AS MEDICINE becomes more and more sophisticated, the need for organ donation increases.

The latest high-profile person to learn that lesson is Charles Tillman, the Chicago Bears cornerback whose daughter, Tiana, received a heart transplant at Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago. It's not the transplant that's news — actually, transplants are becoming more common, even in small children like Tiana, now 6 months old.

What's unusual is that Tiana, while waiting for the right organ, was kept alive with a sophisticated blood-pumping device called the Berlin Heart. She was the first patient in Illinois to use the device before receiving a heart transplant. She suffered from cardiomyopathy, or a congenital enlargement of the heart.

TIANA'S STORY had a happy ending. She was released from the hospital last week.

The man nicknamed "Peanut" — who had a daughter with a condition that made her heart four times as big as it should have been — can now worry about reading routes instead of vital signs.

And he can do that for one reason: Some family decided to turn a negative into a positive, as Tillman said. They agreed to donate their child's precious organs.

"I think probably the toughest thing that I had to battle with, and I still battle with it now, is that I knew in order for my daughter to live, another kid had to die," Tillman said. "I struggled with it and struggled with it."

There is so much about the life of a superathlete that is incomprehensible — the fame, the money, the talent. But Tillman's experience brings the universality of the human existence home.

For everyone whose family member is acutely ill and awaiting a transplant, the question is the same: Will your loved one live? Or will he or she die?

IT'S JUST THAT SIMPLE. The solution is simple, too. Follow the simple steps accompanying this editorial.

It's not just about Charles Tillman's baby.

There are more than 99,000 people on the national transplant waiting list, according to the United Network for Organ Sharing, which matches organs with patients in need.

The upside, as explained on the organ network's Web site, unos.org.: "Transplantation has saved and enhanced the lives of more than 300,000 people in the United States."

THE DOWNSIDE? While medical science has done its part to prolong life, there is no long-term, technological substitute for a human organ. People die while waiting for a transplant. The Gift of Hope Organ & Tissue Donor Network, a not-for-profit organ procurement organization that works with Illinois' nine transplant centers, says an average of 18 people die each day while waiting.

It still comes down to one person donating his or her organs, making a choice to save as many as 25 people.

More than ever, people — even little people like Tiana Tillman — need you.

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How to donate

To donate your organs in Illinois, you should enter the Organ/Tissue Donor Registry, a confidential computerized database that documents a person's wishes regarding donation.

Illinois is now a First-Person Consent state, which means that your decision to be a donor is legally binding. Additional witnesses or family consent is no longer required; your wishes will be honored.

However, if you signed the back of your driver's license but haven't entered the new database (effective January 2006), your donor rights will not be in force. Names will not automatically be transferred from the old registry to the new one.

To enter the registry, follow a link on the Web site, www.lifegoeson.com. If you do not have access to the Internet, call (800) 210-2106 or visit any secretary of state facility.

Know that the first priority for doctors — morally, ethically, and legally — will always be saving your life. They won't hurry your death in a hunger for organs.

In any case, talk to your family about your decision. Let them know that in a tragic situation, you want there to be some good news — saved lives.