

# SOUTHTOWNSTAR

## Woman says receiving lung transplant is 'like being reborn'

April 7, 2008

By Carole Sharwarko, staff writer

Judy Emmart finally can breathe.

Last summer, emphysema and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease barely allowed her to walk across the room.

Then, on July 7, 2007, she hit the jackpot.

"Everybody was getting married, and I was getting a lung," the Oak Forest resident said. "It's like being reborn."

Thanks to a family who decided to donate its deceased family member's organs, Emmart now has a new right lung.

She's telling her story to make the public aware of how big an impact organ donation can make on one person's life, in light of National Organ and Tissue Donor Awareness Week, which begins today.

### Steps toward eligibility

Doctors can't tell Emmart whom her lung came from, but a complex and highly controlled process brought the organ to her. Before she could even become eligible, Emmart went through a battery of tests to look for anything that might compromise her recovery.

"From head to toe I had to be clean," she said. "I had to have tests I didn't want to have."

A colonoscopy revealed an issue doctors treated fairly easily. Her heart tests showed a blockage, so surgeons had to insert a stent.

"The final thing was my teeth," she said. "I went to an oral surgeon because I thought I should have my teeth out. They weren't good to begin with."

Because of her health issue, the surgeon couldn't put Emmart under anesthesia unless she was admitted to a hospital. So she had 19 teeth pulled in the oral surgeon's chair with only local anesthetic.

'We have a lung for you'

Once cleared for takeoff, doctors at Loyola University Medical Center in Maywood registered Emmart with the United Network for Organ Sharing, through which all organ and tissue donations process, according to Michele Martin, heart transplant coordinator at Christ Medical Center in Oak Lawn.

"This is to be sure the organs are allocated equally," Martin said.

The agency categorizes patients according to the urgency of their status and the length of time they've been waiting for an organ.

"One week later, they called and said, 'We have a lung for you.' I almost had a heart attack," Emmart said.

It's uncommon for a match to be made so quickly. And considering what course of events has to happen to make a match, Emmart's case is remarkable.

#### First-person consent

According to Martin, organs can be removed only from a donor who is brain dead. After the brain dies - which might be caused by events like drowning, a gunshot wound or a drug overdose - the body begins to shut down, but this process takes a while.

Once someone is brain dead, he or she legally is declared dead, Martin said. Doctors might keep the body living with machines so the family can say goodbye and so it can talk about donating its loved one's organs.

"Of course, many families struggle with questions," Martin said. "What did their loved one want?"

This question often is answered now, Martin said, through the policy of first-person consent. According to a law enacted Jan. 1, 2006, Illinois residents can register their wish to be a donor with the secretary of state's office. Simply signing the back of your driver's license is not legally binding. First-person consent is, and it takes the decision out of family members' hands.

People still are encouraged to discuss their wishes with family, however, to ease grieving minds.

#### Dispelling myths

If a person didn't register his or her wish and didn't relate it to family, the survivors are left to decide. Martin said Gift of Hope, a nonprofit organization and independent third party, intercedes to help the family.

"It's often difficult for people to let go because they look at the person and think, 'They're not really dead,' because they have a heart rate and they're still warm," Martin said. "But at that point, it's the machines keeping them alive."

Also, definitive tests determine whether someone is brain dead. It's not subjective. Some people also bring up religious questions. But Martin said through her research, she's found no religion against organ donation, even Jehovah's Witnesses, who have certain medical objections.

Another myth Martin encounters is people who claim doctors will let a person die, knowing they're an organ donor.

"That's one of the biggest fallacies," she said. "The donation department has no idea who's dying in other parts of the hospital. And the organ is not necessarily going to your hospital."

Once organs become available, doctors notify UNOS, which assesses the available organs and the area hospitals' needs. Martin said a page goes out to hospitals housing patients with the highest priority.

Donation centers on the receiving end access a secure Web site to review the donor's information. Blood types must match, along with close similarities in height and weight.

Once a match is made, the organ moves to the recipient's hospital in no more than four hours total travel time. Any longer, and it loses viability.

#### Post-surgery changes

When Emmart awoke after her transplant, she didn't remember what happened.

"The surgeon said, 'I just gave you a new lung,' " Emmart said. "The tears flowed for three days."

Though organ recipients often have a new lease on life, their lifestyle takes a hit afterward. Emmart has reduced her daily medication from 20 to 16 prescriptions. All those drugs gave her diabetes, so she also injects insulin.

For a long time, she couldn't go to restaurants, and she can't eat fast food. She said she misses bleu cheese, which is banned because it's a fungus.

"People don't know how much work it takes," she said. "It's not just a bed of gravy when you're done."

Both Martin and Emmart said though they believe in donation, it's a personal decision each family must make on its own.

"People don't realize how hard that decision is to have someone close to them die and leave a gift for someone else," Martin said. "But you're giving someone a second chance at life."

Emmart said she recognizes this gift and prays every night for the man who gave his lung to her. It was a man; that's all she knows.

Emmart was a smoker, but she quit three years ago. She takes the gift too seriously to ever compromise her health again, she said.

"The nurse said people get discharged, and she knows they're going to hit McDonald's. That's saddening," Emmart said. "I talk to my lung every day and tell it, 'You're perfectly content where you're at. Don't give me no static.' "

#### Organ donations

When one becomes an organ and tissue donor, he or she could save up to 26 lives.

For more information about organ and tissue donation and Gift of Hope, visit [giftofhope.org](http://giftofhope.org).

To register first-person consent and become a donor, visit the secretary of state's donation Web site, [lifegoeson.org](http://lifegoeson.org), call (800) 210-2106 or visit any secretary of state's office (where you get your driver's license).