

National Organ and Tissue Donor Awareness Week

Minister of Health, George Abbott

April 26, 2007

Please Check Against Delivery

Thanks Mary for the introduction.

I am delighted to be here this morning as part of Canada's National Organ and Tissue Donation Awareness Week.

To begin, I would like to extend a warm welcome to the donor recipient and the donor mother – your presence here today is a great example of the success of organ donation. I know that the stories and experiences you share will inspire other British Columbians. I would also like to welcome my colleagues who are here to support to this great cause – thanks being here. I would also like to recognize the BC Transplant Society for all the hard work encouraging British Columbians to become organ donors.

The amount of transplants being performed in this province has been increasing. Between April 2006 and April 2007, 270 organ transplants were performed compared to 190 during the same period the year before. Of those, nearly 40 per cent were living donor kidney transplants – the highest ever in B.C.

These are great improvements but more work still needs to be done. As difficult as it is to imagine a situation where our organs become available, it's even more difficult to imagine a lack of viable organs if we, or our loved ones, were facing trauma or disease.

There are rare opportunities in life to do a lot with little effort. Ensuring you have filled out donor registration forms takes only minutes, but those minutes may give someone a new lease on life.

With that said, it is good to be part of the effort to raise awareness about the need for organ donation and to encourage more British Columbians to register their decision. Canada's National Organ and Tissue Donation Awareness Week brings this issue to the forefront – not only in our province but in our country. It affects thousands of Canadians every year, and may touch any of us – our friends, families and loved ones. The chance of requiring an organ transplant is much greater than the chance of ever being a donor.

Since the creation of the transplant society, the number of organ transplants performed annually has increased by more than 400 per cent. 2006 was a record year for transplants in the province with 246 performed. Last year also saw a record number of living donor kidney transplants, with 101 transplants taking place.

Two new initiatives have contributed to this success. The Paired Kidney Exchange Program and B.C.'s Living Donor Expense Reimbursement Program have both helped to improve access to living kidney transplants. Quite simply this has meant that lives have been saved thanks to the generosity of donors and their families, as well as the dedication of the B.C. Transplant Society. I am pleased to see these programs making such a difference and providing options for patients.

Although we have some of the best transplant technology in the world, some of the most highly skilled surgeons and some of the most prestigious transplant hospitals, there are never enough organs – just 14 per cent of British Columbians have registered as organ donors.

We are facing a chronic shortage of hearts, lungs, kidneys and livers for transplant in B.C. as the need far outweighs the number of organs available for transplant. Right now there are more than 300 people on the waitlist to receive an organ transplant. Hundreds more are on kidney dialysis and most of them will one day be placed on a waiting list for a kidney transplant.

This isn't good enough – not for our families and not for B.C. We all need to step up and do more because wait times for organ and tissue transplants depend entirely on the availability of organs for transplant.

I don't know if you have noticed the banner here today with the mother holding her baby up. You may be interested to know that this is the wife of Ken Donahue – one of the BC Transplant Society representatives here today. It was eight years ago that he donated his kidney to his wife. Since then they have had a child together. So you see, we don't always realize the extent that organ donation affects us all – or that can affect those all around us.

Although 2006 was a record year for transplants – and there is a lot to be happy about – in that same year 27 British Columbians died before receiving a donor organ. As I look around, I know that anyone here could represent someone who made the decision to donate their organs. And, of course, we all share the grief of families who have lost a loved one. I can only hope these families are comforted by the knowledge that a life was saved or improved as a result of that gift.

This is a fitting moment to recognize these heroic individuals as true lifesavers on behalf of all British Columbians. We all can learn from these giving individuals. They made a difference and we must do the same. I urge the residents of this province to register to be organ donors – so we can all do our part together.

Sign up and tell your family about your wish to be an organ donor. This decision could truly mean giving the gift of life. The poster board hanging behind me is a registration form. I invite all of you to join myself, Mary and our colleagues to sign one of these forms following the speaking portion of this event.

I thank everyone for being here today. It is nice to see the show of support. I will now hand it back over to Mary to introduce more guests. Enjoy.