

Bill Rea ? I'm registered as a donor

Memories can have a funny way of coming back at you.

In my line of work, busying myself on one story can take me back to one that I worked on years ago. In the latest case, it took me back almost 30 years.

Peel Regional councillors recently heard a presentation from a group trying to promote and encourage people to get themselves registered to be organ or tissue donors.

This, of course, is a very worthy cause, although it's one I haven't thought about in the last several years. And there was a time when the idea of having my organs and other body parts parceled out like parts from a car turned me right off. But like most people who have lived more than a couple of years, I found changing my mind was easy, given the right kind of encouragement.

I think there are a lot of people out there who are perhaps a bit squeamish when it comes to the thought of having their bodies dissected after they're gone. But times change, and so do the attitudes of just about all of us.

Organ transplants would probably been regarded as science fiction for much of the 20th century. And I remember when the first human heart transplant was performed in South Africa in December 1967. Keeping track of the progress of that first recipient, Louis Washkansky, was the first time in my life that I made a point of following a news story.

In subsequent years, I was exposed to more stories of transplants, meeting some people who donated kidneys to others like relatives. I interviewed a man about 25 years ago. It was a couple of days after he received a new heart. One of the strongest memories of that experience was when he unexpectedly showed me the scar. They almost had another cardiac patient then and there.

Not long after that, I interviewed a man who has just undergone a double-lung transplant, and he offered to show me the scar. I declined with thanks (I might actually have threatened to leave if he did).

One interesting fact I recall of these two men was their differing thoughts toward the people who donated their organs after death. The man who received the heart didn't know where his new ticker came from, and he made it clear to me he didn't want to know. He likened it to a piece of equipment from Canadian Tire, believing it was now part of his life and his job was to properly care for it. The man who received two new lungs did know the name of the doner, and was drafting a letter to the surviving family, expressing his gratitude, when I talked to him.

I think I can see either point of view, and I couldn't say whether I would want to know who might have died to leave a vital organ for my use.

Many years have passed since I encountered these two men, and I have no idea as to their status today.

There was another person who played a role in my exposure to transplants, albeit a small one. I guess he and I were distantly related, but I only met him once, as I recall. I had heard that he had had heart trouble for several years, and eventually became a transplant recipient. Alas, as I learned during the recent presentation at Regional council, the wait for transplants can sometimes be too long. The man in question has since died.

So there has been a lot of encouragement over the years for me to be a donor. In fact, the real encouragement came to me some years before I met any of the men referred to above.

The encouragement was in the form of a little girl who I met in the spring of 1984. Her name was Lindsay and she was only two years old the first and only time I met her. She was in desperate need of a live transplant. A group of local youths had put on an event to raise money for Lindsay's fund, and I covered the cheque presentation to her father. He brought Lindsay with him, and I still have the powerful memory of how sick she looked.

The next chapter of the story was a happy one, as Lindsay got the liver she needed the following February (1985). She had to go to Boston for the actual operation. I remember the month well because my birthday is in February, and my driver's licence was up for renewal that year. Those were the days when people signed cards attached to their licences to indicate they were willing to have their organs donated. I recall writing my weekly column about it, reflecting on the irony of the timing of it all. I actually found a copy of that paper as I worked on this piece (Boy, did I ever look youthful, with long, dark hair and clean shaven).

That was the first time I had ever signed my organ donor card. Of course, that's not the way to make yourself and your body parts available today, but more about that presently.

Here's some of what I wrote at the time (correcting a few goofs I spotted almost 29 years later):

?I think there are a lot of people who feel the way I used to about donating their organs. I didn't like to think about dying, and the thought of having my body cut in pieces really didn't appeal to me. Then I saw Lindsay.

I thought that if her life was hanging on someone donating a liver to her, then what justification did I have clinging to my body after death? It just didn't make sense.

I know my liver would have been no use to her, since she required the organ of a child. But one never knows if their passing can be the start of another miracle like the one that has been started in Boston.

From what I've heard about organ transplants, the chance of any part of my body being used after I'm gone is rather slim. But that doesn't really matter. The little girl who donated the liver didn't live very long, but in her short time on this earth, she justified her existence more than many other people ever do.?

So I had the inspiration 29 years ago. I signed my donor card then.

This was before I was married (I hadn't even met my wife at that point), so my parents were my next-of-kin, and I made sure they knew what I had done. That made sense, since they were going to be the ones approached if someone was going to put dibs on my bodily parts. I don't think my folks were completely comfortable with what I was doing. On the other hand, they would have read the aforementioned column, so they knew very well where I was coming from. And I don't think they were able to come up with a sound counter argument. As well, they probably realized the chances they would have to actually call any shots in such a situation were pretty remote.

But the style of driver's licences changed in this province over time, and since there was no donor card to sign, I sort of let that issue slide for a while.

It was the recent presentation at Region that woke me up again.

I have since registered myself as a donor, and my wife has been informed.

?So if I croak, you'll have to deal with people making a play for my liver,? I told her, to her very limited amusement.

It only took a couple of minutes to do it online. It required going to a website (beadonor.ca) and entering certain bits of information, like date of birth, as well as other details found on my health card (I'm one of those dinosaurs who still packs the old red and white card).

But the deed is done, and the reality is the final disposition of my carcass is going to be decided after I have ceased to care, although I have put my wishes on the record.

It is conceivable that several lives could be saved within a day of my death. The few minutes it took me to register to be an organ donor could end up being the most productive couple of minutes I have ever spent.

Don't worry ? I am looking to do better

