

Region supporting awareness campaign for organ donors

By Bill Rea

There are nearly 1,500 people in Ontario waiting for a life-saving organ transplant, and about 170 of them live in Peel Region. That was one of the points made to Regional councillors recently as they voted to support the Trillium Gift of Life Network (TGLN) campaign, due to start Feb. 24.

While there are many people who had indicated a willingness to have their organs and tissues donated after they're gone, one of the problems is their families don't know about it, and that can result in the being approached to make important decisions without warning at a very stressful time.

A report to council from Commissioner of Health Services Jenette Smith stated that a patient waiting for a transplant in Ontario dies about once every three days. It added that about 18.5 per cent of Peel residents have registered as donors. But with no evidence of such registration, only about 60 per cent of families give the required consent.

The registration rate among Caledon residents, aged 16 or older with a health card, is higher than the Peel average, at about 27 per cent.

Region employee and Gift of Life Association volunteer Josie St. Hilliare told councillors of her experience with her daughter, who needed a living liver donor a couple of years ago. St. Hilliare volunteered herself as a donor, and the operation was successful.

Ronnie Gavsie, president and CEO of TGLN, told councillors one donor can save up to eight lives, and enhance the lives of 75 others through tissue donations. She added families have to give consent before organs are harvested, and most of them give it, when they know that was what their loved ones wanted. But she added they can lose about 60 per cent of potential donors simply because families weren't aware of the wishes.

The campaign is slated to run from Feb. 24 to March 7.

Gavsie said TGLN's goal is to have one million donors registered in the Greater Toronto Area by 2015, and she was appealing for support from council in that effort by helping to get the word out. She suggested a form of competition between Caledon, Brampton and Mississauga, involving councillors, municipal staff, community partners, etc.

And while the campaign is set to last until March 7, Gavsie said that doesn't have to be the end of it.

"It can carry on long after," she said.

"I personally think this is very important," Mayor Marilyn Morrison commented.

She said she had a cousin who died at 48, when a needed liver transplant came too late. She said the Town will take part, adding the effort might start before Feb. 24.

Gavsie had said the registration rates in the GTA are somewhat lower than other places in the province. She told Mississauga Councillor Bonnie Crombie that might be due to complications from diversity in large urban areas. She added the highest registration rates are in northern Ontario, with smaller communities where families have lived for generations.

Gavsie also pointed out there are some cultures that are not enthused when it comes to organ donations. In those cases, they try to engage leaders in the community to try and make people realize it's acceptable. She added the educational message often has to be repeated in cases like that.

Gavsie told Councillor Patti Foley of the importance of people being registered and discussing it with their families. If they know ahead of time, they will be spared the burden of a tough decision at an already difficult time.

Foley was another who wondered why wait until Feb. 24.

"We're ready to work with you today," Gavsie told her.

She also told Councillor Allan Thompson people used to register by signing a card attached to their drivers licence. These days, people have to register through a Provincial data base, using their health card. She stressed it only takes a couple of minutes.

Brampton Councillor John Sprovieri observed that the real challenge will be to change the mentality of people when it comes to this issue. He said many people tend to think of registering as a bad omen. "I tend to think that way myself," he admitted.

Sprovieri also observed there are some countries with programs that people have to stipulate they don't want their organs used.

Gavsie said such programs are in place in Spain and Singapore, but she added family consent is required in both countries. She added that since there is presumed consent on the part of the donor, the families might not have discussed the matter, so the decision might be hard to make at the crucial time.

Mississauga Councillor Chris Fonseca said her father died unexpectedly last year, and he had always made his desires to be a donor known.

"It's not a comfortable discussion to have," she admitted, but added it enabled the family to act. She said there were multiple

recipients of her father's organs within 12 hours.

?It's an incredible gift we can give to others in the community,? she observed.