

This Day in History... February 14, 1998

National Donor Day

On February 14, 1998, the first National Donor Day was held in the US. The annual event is held to raise awareness of the need for organ and tissue donations and to honor those who have donated, those who have received donations, and those we lost before donations became available.

The chances of surviving with a donated organ have increased since 1968, when Dr. Denton A. Cooley performed the first heart transplant in the United States. Dr. Cooley's 47-year-old patient lived 204 days. His procedure took place one year after the world's first heart transplant was performed in South Africa by Dr. Christiaan Barnard. That patient died 18 days later.

Also in 1968, the first successful bone marrow transplant in the US for a non-cancer treatment was performed at the University of Minnesota. The patient was a four-month-old boy with an inherited severe combined immunodeficiency syndrome. Then in 1976, the world's first successful bone marrow transplant for cancer was received by a 16-year-old boy with lymphoma.



Someone needs blood every two seconds. Only 37% of the US population is eligible to donate blood, but less than 10% do each year.

In 1998, the Saturn Corporation and United Auto Workers joined together to call for a National Donor Day, to raise awareness of the important need for organ, eye, and tissue donation. The US Department of Health and Human Services supported the idea and National Donor Day has been observed on or around February 14 every year since 1998. Saturn's National Donor Day spokesperson Chris Klug later stated that his "life was saved thanks to the incredible generosity of a donor family... What better way to celebrate the spirit of the Valentine's Day season than to give the gift of life?"

The same year Donor Day was established, the USPS issued a stamp promoting organ and tissue donation. The stamp had come as the result of years of lobbying by organ recipients and other concerned individuals. The First Day ceremony was held at Ohio State University during the US Transplant Games. These games are held in order to call attention to the plight of the thousands of people who are awaiting an organ transplant.

National Donor Day has grown over the years and organizers encourage people to get involved in a number of ways. People can register as organ donors at their local Department of Motor Vehicles, join a Donor Dash 5K run/walk, sew a quilt square, or find other local events. National Donor Day organizers say that it's a day to educate others on all types of donations – organ, eye, tissue, blood, platelets, and marrow. The day is a time to recognize those who have given or received a donation, those who are waiting for a donation, and those who died before a donation was available.

Because of the generosity of strangers, thousands of people have been given a second chance at life through the organ and tissue donation program. Today, over 104,000 Americans are waiting to receive an organ. Of that number, 17 die every day while waiting.



Every nine minutes, a person is added to the national transplant waiting list.

In the years that followed, there were few laws governing the transfer of human organs. In 1984, a businessman announced that he would buy and sell human organs, earning himself a \$2,000 to \$5,000 commission fee on each one. This brought the issue to national attention, leading to the passage of the National Organ Transplant Act of 1984. The act outlawed the sale of human organs and established the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network.

When organs are donated, a complex process begins. The United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS), a non-profit organization that maintains a national transplant list, works closely with transplant centers. They match the donated organ with a potential recipient according to blood type, tissue type, size of the organ, medical urgency, and the distance between donor and recipient. It is possible to transplant two kidneys, two lungs, one heart, one liver, one pancreas, and an intestine from a donor. The heart and lungs can be preserved for four to six hours; the liver and pancreas for 12 to 24 hours; and the kidneys for 48 to 72 hours.



The Red Cross often participates in Donor Day Events. They also observe World Blood Donor Day on June 14.

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