



BY FR KEVIN MCGOVERN

Conference highlights Catholic acceptance of organ donation

A RECENT ONE-DAY conference organised by the Caroline Chisholm Centre for Health Ethics highlighted the Catholic Church's support for organ donation and organ transplantation. It also educated health professionals (including pastoral-care workers) about the practices of organ donation, and encouraged everyone to register as an organ donor.

Guest speaker and State Medical Director of DonateLife in Victoria Dr Helen Opdam told the conference that while Australia is a world leader in successful transplants, by international standards our donation rate is relatively low. The Commonwealth Government has provided \$151 million over four years so Australia can become a world leader in organ and tissue donation and transplantation.

The first speaker at the conference was Mgr Tony Ireland, Episcopal Vicar for Health and Aged Care in the Archdiocese of Melbourne. Mgr Ireland cited both the Catechism of the Catholic Church and Pope Benedict XVI.

Paragraph 2296 of the Catechism states: "Organ donation after death is a noble and meritorious act and is to be encouraged as an expression of generous solidarity."

In 2008, Pope Benedict XVI said: "The act of love which is expressed with the gift of one's vital organs remains a generous testimony to charity that is able to look beyond death so that life always wins."

Dr Opdam then addressed the conference. She said that when someone decided to become an organ donor, it was very important for them to discuss this with their family and friends. Thirty per cent of people were not doing this, and some families then did not allow organ donation because they did not know their loved one's wishes.

Dr Bernadette Hickey is the Hospital Based Medical Director of Organ and Tissue Donation at St Vincent's Hospital, Melbourne. She told the conference that only those who die in hospital in specific circumstances can become organ donors. Most are declared brain



From left: Ms Bernie Dwyer, Organ Donor Coordinator, DonateLife; Rev Kevin McGovern, Director Caroline Chisholm Centre for Health Ethics; Mr Emiliano Zucchi, Transcultural & Language Services Manager, Northern Health; Ms Monica Dowling, Senior Nurse Organ and Tissue Donation, Northern Health; Rev Cormac Nagle OSF, Hospital Ethicist, Mercy Hospital for Women.

dead while on mechanical ventilation in Intensive Care. Dr Hickey explained that brain death is the "irreversible cessation of all functions of the entire brain." The Australian and New Zealand Intensive Care Society (ANZICS) is the professional association of medical practitioners who work in Intensive Care. Their Statement on Death and Organ Donation (Third Edition, 2008) sets out thorough and reliable standards for the determination of death.

I was the next speaker and my presentation explored why brain death really is death. While death usually means a pale, cold body, with neither breath nor a pulse, by contrast, those who are brain dead are still pink and warm. Because of mechanical ventilation, they display both breath and heartbeat. Brain death is therefore somewhat counter-intuitive. I also noted that Pope John Paul II endorsed the concept of brain death in an important speech on 29 August 2000.

Our next session included three speakers. Bernie (Bernadine) Dwyer is an organ donor coordinator. She cares for families as they consider organ donation. If it goes ahead, she continues to care for them throughout the process, and then beyond with bereavement follow-up. A caring, respectful and experienced organ donor coordinator like Bernie would make a difficult time and a difficult decision just a bit easier.

Mary Gyles has experienced this decision. Her athletic, 15-year-old son Philippe suffered a bleed in his brain in 2002. He was taken to Intensive Care, and subsequently declared brain dead. With her husband and their other son, Mary decided that Philippe was a generous young man who would want

his organs to be used for transplant. Even as they experienced the grief of Philippe's death, this was the decision that they made.

Martin Dutch spoke about his daughter Abbey, who was born with a liver disease called biliary atresia. He played a video to show how sick and distressed she was at 14 months. She was truly at death's door. However, a liver transplant has changed that. Martin's wife Shirley and their daughter Abbey joined us at the conference. A year and a half after her transplant, Abbey is now a happy, energetic and thoroughly delightful child. She is also a dramatic illustration of the way in which organ transplants can transform lives.

Emiliano Zucchi and Monica Dowling from Northern Health spoke about culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities and organ donation. CALD Australians are underrepresented among organ donors, and innovative work is being undertaken at Northern Health to educate diverse communities about organ donation. Among religions, only Shinto and Romani present barriers to organ donation. Jehovah's Witnesses can be donors and recipients if the organs and tissues are drained of blood.

Our conference challenged us all to discover, decide and discuss – to discover the facts, to decide about organ donation, and then to discuss our decision with our family and friends. ■

A decision to become an organ donor can be recorded at the Australian Organ Donor Register. The form to do this can be obtained by calling the register on 1800 777 203.

Fr Kevin McGovern is the Director of the Caroline Chisholm Centre for Health Ethics, which is sponsored by Victoria's Catholic hospitals.