

YOUR GOOD HEALTH

Organ donations rise due to overdose deaths

Medical advances make it possible to do transplants in opioid-related deaths

By Marion Renault
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Two days before he died of a drug overdose, Tony Shires stripped off his shirt in the middle of Circleville's Pumpkin Show to sop up his 5-year-old nephew's bloody nose.

Even when he was high, Tony was looking out for others, said sister Kelsey Shires, 27.

"That's just who he was. If you didn't have a dollar and he had just one in his pocket, he would end up without a dollar," she said.

Tony Shires, 28, of Clintonville, Ohio, had been sober from heroin for six years.

In 2017, he went to treatment for Xanax and suboxone dependency and was clean for 51 days before he relapsed and overdosed on heroin Oct. 23.

Even in death, he was generous. Because he was an organ donor, his kidneys, pancreas and liver saved three strangers.

"That was what he wanted. People can judge, but he could be the one who saved your dad, your whoever," said his wife, Amanda Shires, 27.

"When it's a hard day I think, 'It's not only bad. Something good did come out of it.'"

Last year was a record one across the board for the group Shires donated to, Lifeline of Ohio, central Ohio's regional organ-donation organization.

The nonprofit group saw a 37 percent increase in organs transplanted, as well as a record number of donors and recipients.

The jump in activity stems, in part, from soaring rates of drug overdoses.

Nationwide, the number of eventual organ donors who died of drug overdoses has more than doubled

over the past three years, according to United Network for Organ Sharing, a nonprofit group that operates the United States' only organ procurement and transplantation network.

In Lifeline of Ohio's service area — which encompasses 37 Ohio counties and two in West Virginia — a quarter of the 2017 organ donors died from overdoses in 2017, up from nearly 12 percent the previous year.

"That's a drastic increase," said Andrew Mullins, Lifeline's director of partner services. "We know the drug epidemic that's sweeping our state, and donation has had an effect on transplant rates."

Shires' family members said they were surprised Tony could still be a donor.

He took his first oxycodone pill after an eighth-grade football injury and was battling a heroin addiction by the age of 18.

Although drug overdoses halt a person's breathing or stop the heart, drug addiction doesn't necessarily harm organs, said Becki Brown, a family services coordinator for Lifeline. Medical tests performed at the time of death confirm which of a patient's organs are viable for transplant.

"There's a lot of misconceptions about donations," Brown said. "Once people ask and learn, they're almost always supportive."

There are no costs or age limits for organ and tissue donation.

Senior citizens, newborn babies, people with poor eyesight, cancer survivors and even those with diabetes or hepatitis can donate.

To be eligible for donation, a person has to be in the hospital, on a ventilator and declared brain dead.

This happens in only 1 percent of all deaths in the U.S., according to Lifeline.

A single person can potentially save eight lives



When Amanda Shires' husband, Tony, died of an opioid overdose last October, the family decided to donate his organs. Drug addiction doesn't necessarily harm organs, experts say. [ERIC ALBRECHT/DISPATCH]

Opioid overdoses

- Overdose deaths usually occur when oxygen cannot reach the brain, leaving most organs unaffected. The drugs and blood are flushed from the organs when they are removed from the body.

- Opioid overdoses accounted for more than 42,000 deaths in 2016, more than any previous year on record. An estimated 40 percent of opioid overdose deaths involved a prescription opioid.

— Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

through heart, kidney, liver, pancreas, lung and small intestine donations.

They also can help heal more than 50 others by donating skin tissue for burn victims, veins for people with chronic pain, tendons for athletes or corneas for the vision-impaired.


Today, about 115,000 Americans are waiting for a life-saving transplant, according to the United Network for Organ Sharing.

"With medical advances, organs that historically wouldn't be able to be transplanted now can be," Mullins said. "It's becoming more of a cultural norm. More people are saying 'Yes, why wouldn't I be a donor?'"

Years before his final donation, Tony Shires volunteered to give his grandmother one of his kidneys when she needed a transplant.

His mother, Beth Vermillion, 51, said it's painful to square the devastation of the ongoing opioid epidemic with its potential for increasing organ donations.

"Although the pain is still there and it doesn't fill the void of him not being there, he did some good. I'm proud of my son," she said.



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