

John was 39 when he died.

To both him and I, he was a fit and healthy young man in the prime of his life but little did we know that his life was about to be cut horrendously short. He died of a heart attack in North Carolina (USA) whilst we were on holiday. His background story matters, because there's a reason I knew what John's wishes after his death would have been.

John's father died of a heart attack 2 months before John did. It was a terrible time in mid-2007, as his mother was slowly dying of a brain tumour. John and I talked about death a lot in the month leading up to our extended holiday to the U.S. I knew what songs he wanted playing at his funeral, and also whether he wanted "machines" turning off if he was ever in a situation where he was being kept alive by a ventilator. This wasn't morbid to us, it was practical and sensible.

I also knew that he wanted to donate after he died. John was very clear about this and he carried a donor card. So, like every other aspect of death, I had talked to him, and I knew his wishes. He knew what I wanted, and I knew what he wanted.

But John didn't die here, where I really hope that his details would be quickly accessed on a donor register. Or that someone like you would talk to me about the possibility of donation. He died in America.

A social worker sat and held my hand when the doctor told me that my John, had died at 3.04pm Eastern Time and I screamed and cried and felt numb and lost, and more than anything else, I felt alone. So I viewed his body, and held his hand and talked to him and felt his feet going cold. I cry when I tell you this because John was the love of my life and I had lost him. The Social Worker gave me the number of a funeral home that she said "was a friendly and supportive family firm". I tell you this because I think it shows you that I do remember accurately the way that the doctor spoke to me. Even in the first stage of my grief I was able to remember that the doctor said "Eastern Time" and the Social Worker said the funeral director was "friendly and supportive". I could have made clear and informed decisions about John's organs or tissue.

But I didn't mention the donation of organs to the doctor or the social worker or the chaplain because if I'm honest I presumed after a heart attack it would have meant that they couldn't use any organs anyway. His heart had suffered a massive fatal occlusion and so what part of John would be able to be used? And anyway, why should I have been the one to even think about this? It makes me really angry now, because I was grief-stricken, so how could I be the person to start a sane and sensible conversation about organ donation? However I know, honestly and truthfully, that I would have quickly been able to tell the doctor that I wanted donations if he had mentioned it. I know this because I was VERY CLEAR about John's wishes. Your mind is in a whirlwind when someone close to you passes away. You can't speak clearly and my mind was a blank, I was numb and couldn't function without him. However, I feel that I would have been able to smile through my tears and tell them what John wanted, but no-one gave me that choice.

I feel that I would have found much comfort in the fact that John's untimely horrendous death would have meant a glimmer of hope for someone else. How wonderful would it be now, to look back and think that someone is able to see, or not on dialysis, because of my John.

But I don't have that; because neither a health professional, nor social worker, nor Chaplain asked me whether I had considered donating organs or tissues for other people. No-one. They all talked about funeral directors, signing forms for my holiday insurance, whether the Police Officer wanted to talk to me further and when the autopsy would take place.

So I haven't got the opportunity to smile and think that part of John has made someone else's life better and it makes me very sad because I now find out that many tissues could have been used, if only someone had asked me the question. But they didn't ask.

That small conversation, that ultimately is insignificant in your life, never happened, and has created a significant loss in mine.

Please ask all family members about donation, because I would have been able to make the right decision.

Cheryl Pearson
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