

The gift of an organ has them walking, running

Reg Green

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I recently succumbed to the charms of not one but two personable women, much younger than me, and twins at that. I have been suffering the pangs of remorse ever since. My downfall: I agreed to their pleas to take part in a relay walk that goes 128 miles from Marin County to Santa Cruz.

Each team member walks two segments of five or six miles, some of it over mountains, some at dead of night, all of it working against time. An enjoyable outing for the young and athletic perhaps but, at 78, what was I thinking? Advanced years, it seems, bring neither wisdom nor discretion, let alone common sense.

But any tendency toward self-pity has been banished by the company I will be in. This annual walk and the 199-mile relay run that goes with it (www.therelay.com) are the brainchild of Dr. Jeff Shapiro, an anesthesiologist at Sequoia Hospital in Redwood City, that aim to draw attention to the crying need to increase organ donations.

People needing a transplant wait for months, sometimes years, permanently on edge and going on an emotional roller-coaster whenever the telephone rings. Every day 17 people on the waiting list, some of them children, some just babies, lose this nerve-racking race against time and simply waste away.

Thirty-five-year-old Ana Stenzel, one of the charmers who got me into this race, was diagnosed at birth with cystic fibrosis. "Her lungs will deteriorate and eventually fail," the doctors told her parents. "There is no cure." There was more to come. Ana's twin, Isa, also tested positive.

Theirs is not a family to give in to trouble. When growing up both girls, though in and out of hospital with lung infections and suffering from coughing spasms that doubled them up, hiked and swam, studied hard enough to go to Stanford and then took master's degrees at Berkeley.

But the illness was progressing. Often they were gasping for breath, scarcely able to talk. They would wake up at night in a panic feeling as though they were drowning. They became dependent on oxygen.

Eventually Ana, who had always been the sicker of the two, was put on the transplant waiting list but three agonizing years passed before the day came in 2000 when the family of a 29-year-old man, who had died of an aneurysm, made the decision to donate that saved her. By then, her own lungs were so diseased they had to be scraped off the wall of her chest.

Four years later Isa, so close to death that she was drifting in and out of consciousness, received the lungs of an 18-year-old killed in a car accident.

Both sisters, like all recipients, know they can have a relapse at any time: their bodies, constantly fighting to reject the new organ, are held in check only by powerful drugs. Transplanted lungs are particularly prone to infection.

But despite setbacks from time to time, Ana has climbed Half Dome in Yosemite National Park with a 25-pound backpack, a 17-mile roundtrip and a 5,000-foot climb from the trailhead. Isa regularly swims 100 laps and, to celebrate a strength in her lungs that she had never known before, learned to play the bagpipes.

Both sisters are profoundly grateful for the "wonderful years" they have already had. "I want everything I do to have a purpose," Isa says. "I want to be worthy of my donor."

Ana has been suffering a recent period of rejection dangerous enough that she will not be able to take part in the walk, but tomorrow and on Sunday Isa will run three punishing segments of the 199-mile race, along with three thousand others.

The pool of potential organ donors is very small, only people whose brain has stopped working, perhaps from a head injury or a stroke, but who are on a ventilator that is keeping their heart beating and their organs viable. That is why each decision is so important. On the other hand, almost anyone can donate tissue - corneas to cure blindness, skin for excruciating burns, bone to straighten spines. Each donation produces on average three or four organs and each tissue donation can help 20, 30 or more people.

The key to ending the shortage is to have thought about donating ahead of time. In those lonely hospital rooms, numb and tired and grappling with the realization that someone they laughed with, or spoke sharply to, just a few hours before has gone out of their lives for ever, making that big a decision is just too hard for many people.

Since last year, Californians have an easy way to take this problem off the shoulders of their family. They can put their names on the official state registry -- as 1.3 million already have -- whenever they renew their driver's license or by going online to www.donateLIFEdcalifornia.org (in Spanish www.doneVIDAcalifornia.org).

With so many lives at stake, I often wonder what possible debate there can be about what is the right thing to do.

Reg Green is the father of Nicholas Green, the 7-year-old Bodega Bay boy, who was shot in Italy in 1994 and whose organs were donated to seven Italians. The Green's Web site is www.nicholasgreen.org.