

## **Understanding Brain Death (Commonly Asked Questions)**

### **Q. If my loved one is brain dead, what does that mean?**

**A.** Brain death means there is **no activity in the brain**. The brain is no longer functioning in any capacity and **it never will again**. A brain dead person is dead.

### **Q. What can cause brain death?**

**A.** Death of the brain can occur from illness or accidental injuries. High blood pressure can also cause bleeding in the brain and death. A brain infection, a brain tumor, or a traumatic injury may also cause the brain to swell and lead to death.

### **Q. How does the doctor determine brain death?**

**A.** Doctors examining the patient will run through a battery of tests to determine whether any brain activity is present. If all brain activity is absent, the patient is dead. In California, two doctors are required to make individual evaluations of brain activity before a person is pronounced dead.

### **Q. I have understand that when an individual dies, his/her heart stops beating. If my loved one is dead, why does his/her heart continue to beat?**

**A.** There are actually two ways that people die. One is when the heart stops beating. The other is when the brain stops functioning. When the brain stops functioning, the heart can continue beating if oxygen is pumped into the lungs because the heart is part of the autonomic nervous system. But after the brain stops functioning, all other bodily systems will begin to break down, and the heart will soon follow. Once this process starts, it cannot be reversed.

### **Q. Is removing the breathing machine the same as causing the death of my loved one or not giving her/him the chance to recover?**

**A.** No. When the brain dies, it will never recover. The patient is already dead. The machine is artificially pumping air into the lungs, only giving the appearance of life. When a patient is declared brain dead, the breathing machine will be removed as soon decisions about organ donation are made.

### **Q. What is the legal time of death for a brain dead patient?**

**A.** The legal time of death is the date and time that doctors determine that all brain activity has ceased.

### **Q. Are there any proven cases where patients were declared brain dead and later were restored to a normal life?**

**A.** No. Brain death is always irreversible. Brain death is death.

### **Q. How can we deal with our struggle between hope and letting go?**

**A.** Sometimes we must accept the things we cannot change. When brain death is declared, there is no hope for recovery. It is time to let go. False hope delays the grieving process which allows for emotional healing.