

NY1 News

MOD Squad Helps Increase Organ Donation Consent

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Thousands of Americans die each year while waiting for an organ donation. Now, one organization has made it a mission to reduce that number dramatically. NY1 Health Reporter Itay Hod has the story.

Five years ago, Dana Minaya's son Walter died in an accident. He was only 17 years old. When the doctor gave Dana the bad news, she had to leave the room.

"The discussion was entirely clinical, and I just wanted a little humanity," she says.

Dana decided to donate her son's organs: his heart, liver and kidneys saved four people. But she didn't stop there - she became one of the first members of the New York City MOD Squad, which stands for "mothers of organ donors."

The moment a patient is pronounced brain dead, these women are called in to help.

"People I guess who aren't bereaved can't understand," said Vicki Crosier, the founder of the program.

Vicki's son Kyle was also killed in an accident, and she couldn't even communicate with her doctor, who didn't speak English.

"We're a support system when there is none," she says.

The program originated in Albany. Preliminary data shows hospitals using the MOD Squad had a 14 percent increase in organ donation consent.

Now, seven New York City hospitals have the MOD Squad on their speed dial. Doctors say having the team there takes a huge burden off their shoulders.

"It's almost as if it removes the decision from the physician and the hospital, and it makes it a more global decision," says Dr. Erica Friedman of Mt. Sinai Hospital.

More than 8,000 New Yorkers are now on waiting lists for an organ. Each year, only 200 will get their life-saving operation in time. Half of the families who could donate don't.

"We're in a crisis," says Julia Rivera, the communications director of the New York Organ Donor Network.

She says these situations are so delicate, one wrong move can be devastating. The MOD Squad helps gain the family's trust.

"It allows our staff to then come into that exchange and that relationship to the family and offer them the option of donation," says Rivera.

There's a fine line between giving people advice and pushing people to do something they may not want to do. To make sure that doesn't happen, MOD Squad volunteers are trained. During simulated exercises, they are not allowed to bring up the subject unless asked.

The federal government just signed a \$1.3 million check to expand the MOD Squad to other areas in the country, in the hopes that even something as tragic as sudden death might also bring about the gift of life.

- *Itay Hod*