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# Innocence Lost in First Harvesting

By Anna Hagan, RN

My first experience in organ harvesting was last year, from a beautiful teenaged girl. It was a poignant, painful journey from the time the patient was wheeled into the OR, until the final extubation. My story speaks of a mother's loss, of nurse's feelings, and of the helpless despair we sometimes feel in our work, and especially of an innocence lost.

In writing about this experience, something remains forever etched on my soul, which changed my life in a multitude of ways, and touches my reality daily. I have attempted to make sense of the many difficult realities we must face each day, as OR nurses.

It has freed my soul to write about the experience. I am happy to share my thoughts with my colleagues in the OR.

I have been nursing for 10 years, but also continue to be a Yorkville hairstylist, (my career for 20 years prior to nursing) the career which provided the financing to study nursing.

It sounded innocent enough at the beginning. I was called in for an evening shift at the Hospital for Sick Children, and all went smoothly until I heard we were expecting a "Donor" for a "Harvesting". I expected this young woman would have been in an accident, only to realize, as she was wheeled into the OR, her perfect 13 year old body was completely unscathed. She was intubated, her eyes taped shut, her long lashes extending beyond the width of the tape. She had nicked her legs shaving a few days ago. Her sandy blonde hair was in a thick French braid with a beautiful purple bow in it. I could not comprehend what would have caused this girl's untimely

death. Aghast, I stepped back as the anaesthetist pointed out the large purple ring around her neck. This beautiful young child, on the verge of womanhood, had hanged herself. Her body was so firm and pristine, like a bud snipped before full bloom.

Immediately, I felt sick. I thought of her parents and how very devastating this must be for them, to give their youngest child's organs away. What a brave and valiant decision but also, what a waste of a life. Later, I discovered this young girl had divulged a secret to a schoolhood chum who then betrayed her confidence, which sent her spiraling down what must have been an intense search for freedom from her betrayal and agony. Her parents had placed her in a boarding school here in Toronto while they lived separately, thousands of miles away in the U.S.A. How alone she must have felt, how desperate she must have been. What, I wonder, could that secret have been? How well I remember what profound meaning everything held and how confusing it was being a teenager. (Even in the security of a two-parent family living in middle class suburbia)! Whatever the secret was, she no longer saw her life as valid or worth protecting. She must have felt so unloved, perhaps even unlovable.

## Author

Anna Hagan, RN, has been in nursing 10 years, and is currently a staff nurse at the Hospital for Sick Children, and the Toronto Hospital, Toronto, Ontario. She also trained as a hairstylist and worked for 20 years as a stylist, which provided the funding for her nursing education.

She would have been 14 on December 22, only three days before Christmas. How would anyone that loved her ever enjoy Christmas again? How would her parents or the girl that betrayed her confidence ever find the strength to carry on? I have never felt sick in the O.R., but this case has gone deep into my soul, where an innocence has ended. There is a cloud, black and menacing, that hangs over my gentle spirit. I don't know how to free myself of it or where to put it.

I race home to my children and spouse, to feel their warm loving arms around me. I sneak into my three-year old's room to feel the hot breath from his nostrils on my cheek. My one-year old infant lies curled up between her bunnies and bears, sucking on her lip as she sleeps. God is there in them, as they exist beautifully before me. It is for them that I pray we can always talk things out and support each other. Without the love of your family and friends, without the courage and fortitude allowed us through love, we can never be whole or happy. Contentment is a wonderful place, a place I had longed for, for many years. A place I had found prior to the arrival of our children, a place I cherish more each day.

And so, I send this young girl devoid of brain function to the morgue and then the funeral home, to let the grieving begin for her family. I can't even imagine the void in her mother's soul. How terribly tortured she must be. Her creation, so perfect and beautiful, has been destroyed. Although this child may appear pieced together externally, her blood and guts have been carved and dissected ever so neatly so that someone else may live through her tragedy. Of course, I know there can be happiness for others in her tragedy, but nothing will ever change the indignity she has suffered.

When all the organs are "harvested," the anaesthetist will shut off all life support and there will be silence. A silence so loud it's unbearable to our ears. She will not gasp and snort, nor will she reach up with her arms in an attempt to extubate herself. No. She will lie still forever. The artificial warmth that has maintained her organs' life will soon cool. As the last flicker of life passes, she is wheeled to the morgue to be kept cool until the coroner can assault her body once more. Today I've been robbed. Robbed of an innocence I'll never regain. ■

See: Responses of Perioperative Nurses to Organ Procurement Surgery by Soledad Page, RN, MSN. *Canadian Operating Room Journal* Vol.14, No.4, Nov/December, 1996.

## Bursary for OR Nurses

The ORNAC/Johnson & Johnson Medical Products bursary was established to financially assist ORNAC members in furthering their education in areas that will enhance perioperative nursing practice. The ORNAC Awards Committee, comprised of members from across the country, choose successful applicants in accordance with established selection criteria.

### Eligibility Requirements

The applicant must be a registered nurse who is licensed with the Provincial Professional Association. The applicant must also be an active member of the Provincial Operating Room Nursing Association two consecutive years prior to submitting the application. The individual must be employed, with a primary focus on perioperative nursing, according to the official ORNAC definition.

Funding is available for post basic operating room nursing programs approved by ORNAC, Baccalaureate nursing programs and Masters and Ph.D. nursing programs related to health care and considered an enhancement to existing perioperative employment.

### Application Requirements

The personal profile / resume must be typed and supporting data enclosed with the completed application form. The application will not be considered if this criteria is not met. This data includes letters of reference as indicated on the application form, photo copies of nursing license, membership in a provincial OR association, perioperative nursing certification (if applicable) and proof of acceptance in an education program.

The complete, typed application form and supporting documentation must be submitted to the Chair of the ORNAC Awards Committee before is **March 15th yearly**. Late submissions will not be considered.

This bursary is administered by the ORNAC Awards Committee. The applications are judged by the committee based on established criteria. If there are no suitable applicants, the award will not be presented and funds will be carried over to the next year. Bursary funds are designated specifically for tuition and books. Final approval for disbursement of funds rests with the Awards Committee and the Board.

ORNAC recognizes that the education of perioperative nurses plays a pivotal role in providing a strong and successful national organization.

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