

93 Minutes

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Chrissy was my senior resident in the ICU.
She never minced her words.
“Reza, can you cover a DCD in the OR?
Patient will be prepped soon for organ donation.”

“Sure,” I replied without hesitation.
Her head moved up from the screen.
Hour fourteen of a brutal shift written across her face,
“Please make sure you review the palliative care plan.”
Medications for pain, anxiety, and air hunger.

DCD: Donation after Circulatory Death.
Three letters. Intimidating. A new experience.
This was my first time honoring a patient’s dying wish.
And I would be alone in the OR.

The patient said goodbye to family.
Warm sunlight flooded her ICU room.
She signaled our team with a head nod.
This was on her own terms.

The operating room buzzed.
The surgical team huddled.
The organ donation rep shuffled papers.
Our ICU nurse, steady.
A final-year nursing student
clutching a stopwatch – timer ready
breathing loudly in the room.

The doors open.
She arrived.
Awake. Still intubated. Eyes open.

I didn’t know if she could hear me.
I spoke anyway
quietly, softly, calmly stating,
“You are safe. We are here. You are not alone.”

All eyes turned to me.
I nodded to the respiratory therapist.
The tube came out.
The clock started.

Ninety minutes.
That was the window.
If she died within ninety minutes –
her kidneys could be donated.
If not: discarded.

Thirty minutes. Vitals steady.
The rep's voice cut through silence:
"Sixty minutes left."
"Forty-five."

Each announcement: a countdown.
Not just of organ viability.
Of her life.

Sixty minutes.
The monitor's pitch dragged.
Her heart was slowing.
She grimaced at times.
A tear slid down her cheek.
She did not speak any words.

"Another dose of dilaudid. Now."
My voice echoed with each order.
The nurse gave it calmly.
The student kept time.

Together, we shielded her –
with medication,
with presence,
with words.
From pain. From fear.

Seventy minutes.
Eighty.
The rep's voice boomed –
"Ten minutes left."

By then I had stopped listening.
My job was clear.
This woman would not die afraid.
Not gasping.
Not alone.

Ninety minutes.
Her heart barely holding on.
The rep announced loudly –
"No longer proceeding with donation.
Policy is to move her back to the floor."

I shook my head in disbelief.
"No. We'll keep her here. She's not dying in an elevator."
Her heart rate dropped suddenly.
25. 10. 4. Zero.
Silence.

I stepped forward to pronounce –
quietly moving closely, she gasped.
The team chuckled through tears.
I nearly jumped out of my shoes.

One final breath.
Then stillness.

She died at 93 minutes.

Her kidneys were not recovered.
Her wish, it seemed, unfulfilled.
I left the OR after she was taken away.

Five days later, on my surgery rotation –
My inbox chimes on my phone.
It was early in the morning, sunrise had started.
A message from the organ donor rep:

Although her organs weren't used,
she had given the gift of tissue donation.
Helping up to 75 people.

Attached, a note from her family:

"Barb was kind, cheerful, helpful, creative, thoughtful, busy, well-read, smart, loving wife, mother and friend. She enjoyed games, gardening, golf, knitting, children, travel and more. She loved to laugh and could find the humor in any situation. She will be dearly missed."

I sat there, coffee in hand.
Replaying the events in my mind.
Staring outside the hall window.
Warm sunlight was bathing me.

That day in OR four was never about a deadline.
It was about presence.
Bearing witness.
Creating dignity in her final moments.

That's what it means to hold space.
To protect a patient from fear.
To steady a team.
To carry forward a family's love.

And it is a privilege I will never forget.