

Interview with David J. Undis: The Founder and Executive Director of LifeSharers

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About David J. Undis and LifeSharers

David J. Undis is the Founder and Executive Director of LifeSharers. Originally from Nashville, Tennessee, and holding a BA from Macalester College and an MBA from New York University, Undis launched LifeSharers in 2002 following a 25-year career in the insurance industry. LifeSharers is a voluntary network of organ donors, whereby members agree to donate their organs first to other members of the LifeSharers network, and then to the general public if a suitable match is not found. By restricting their gifts according to this model, members of LifeSharers create an incentive for others to donate their organs. More information about LifeSharers is available at www.lifesharers.org.

PBJ: *What motivated you to start LifeSharers?*

Undis: I kept reading about how many people were dying while waiting to get transplants and how few people were organ donors. It just occurred to me that if you had to be a registered organ donor to get a transplant, then everyone would register and we would save lots of lives. I did some research and found that other people had thought of this idea, but no one had done anything with it. So, I decided that I would. This idea has been around for at least 15 years, and the Internet really makes it doable.

PBJ: *How does LifeSharers work?*

Undis: LifeSharers is an attempt to save lives by convincing more people to donate their organs when they die. Our plan is to give people a good reason to donate. When we came along, the only reason to donate organs was the chance to help someone else. Unfortunately, for too many people, that's not a good enough reason. So, we are giving people a better reason, or at least another reason. There is a chance to save their own lives by agreeing to donate their organs when they die.

PBJ: *It seems that to have a real impact on the organ donation shortage, you will need an extremely large network of members. How do you plan on attracting more members to LifeSharers?*

Undis: We are now at 3,731. I spend a lot of my time doing press outreach: writing to reporters who have written on the subject of organ donation; writing TV stations that run stories; writing op-ed pieces and trying to get them published; and giving speeches.

PBJ: *Have you found that the public has been open to your attempts to gather support?*

Undis: Most people's immediate reaction when they hear what we are doing is, "Gee, that makes a lot of sense; that's really fair."

PBJ: *What has it been like navigating the medical realm as someone with a different background?*

Undis: We have not gotten a whole lot of support from the medical community yet, but that is changing.

PBJ: *Why do you feel that the medical community hasn't gotten on board?*

Undis: I do not really know. In the first place, it is hard for me to attract their attention. I have not run into a lot of opposition from the medical community; rather, it is more a question of not being successful in getting much attention from them. I see all the new members come in and every once in a while I see someone with an M.D. behind their name. I do not want to leave you with the impression that we're getting any opposition from that community.

PBJ: *To this day, no LifeSharers members have become eligible donors. How do you plan on approaching that first case?*

Undis: The key fact is that what we are doing is legal in all fifty states and the District of Columbia under state and federal law. So, I have every expectation that when one of our members finally does become an organ donor, the transplant people in the hospital where it happens will follow the law and the wishes of our member. Keep in mind that these transplant personnel always follow the wishes of the donor's next of kin. There are now forty-three states where registering as an organ donor is legally binding. By law, family cannot override that decision. There is not a single instance that I know of or a single state where that law has ever been enforced. No one wants to deal with a grieving family. No one has to deal with people who die when that grieving family overturns their loved one's wishes to donate their organs.

My point here is that if people always follow the wishes of the family when the law is on their side, why would I all of a sudden think that these people are going

to start opposing families when the law is not on their side? Imagine the negative publicity that the organ transplant industry is going to get if the American public finds out that it tried to stop an organ donor from exercising his legal right to give his organs to another organ donor so they could take them and give them to someone who had not donated organs. [The organ transplant industry] does not want that publicity.

PBJ: What happens if the next of kin opposes the individual's decision?

Undis: There is not a whole lot that we can do about it. Having said that, however, I think that is relatively unlikely. There is a large number of members whose family members are also members. We get a lot of memberships in bunches. A man will sign up, his wife will sign up, and they'll sign up their three kids. So if you're a member, and two or three of your family members are also members, it's not likely at all that they're going to override your wishes. We're having a positive impact in terms of reducing the chances those family members are going to override organ donation wishes.

PBJ: Is LifeSharers a cohesive network? Do members of the network have contact with each other?

Undis: I would not say that LifeSharers is a cohesive network. We have members in all 50 states; people who have gone to our website and signed up, read about us in newspapers, or saw a story about us on TV. Most of these people don't know each other. We also encourage and we've had pretty good success recruiting new members by asking our members to let their friends know, using viral marketing. LifeSharers is not a national organization that has meetings where people get to know one another.

PBJ: Do people know where their organs go after donation?

Undis: If the person wants it to go to Richard Jones in Raleigh, North Carolina, to that extent, there is an opportunity for people to know where their organs go. What happens after that is anyone's guess.

PBJ: How do you safeguard against individuals who might be abusing the system? Would you ideally like to require some sort of medical criteria?

Undis: No, we do not want to discriminate against sick people. Imagine the opposition we would generate if we excluded everyone who needed an organ. Also, keep in mind that a whole lot of people who need organs can be organ donors. You can have a bad heart, but have a perfectly good kidney or perfectly good lungs. So, no, we have no reason to do that. We currently have twenty-three members who are on the UNOS waiting list for an organ, which I find interesting. Much less than one percent of our members need organs. I thought we would get a lot of people who need organs. It hasn't happened yet.

PBJ: What would you like to see happen to solve the huge problem of organ shortage in this country?

Undis: Ideally, I'd like everyone in the county to join LifeSharers. I think organs should go first to organ donors. If everyone in the country did join LifeSharers, we'd have twice as many organs available and we'd save a whole lot of lives.

PBJ: How do you feel about financial compensation for the donation of organs?

Undis: It is my own personal belief that compensation is a good idea, but I am not here to advocate a specific proposal for compensation. There are lots of those out there. I think it is insane to think that we wouldn't have more organs if people got paid for them. I think it's a good idea. I also think there is about zero likelihood that compensation will become legal in the foreseeable future. From a political standpoint, it is a complete non-starter, it just is not going to happen. You will never see your congressman or senator standing up there in Washington arguing for paying for organs. It is just not going to happen.

So, given that belief, what we're doing is the best possible alternative. If they repealed the relevant section of the National Organ Transplant Act and allowed people to buy and sell kidneys, we would save thousands of lives a year and we would not need LifeSharers. 🙄