

Perth man's death saved the life of two others

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SPECIAL REPORT: Robyn Turnor

June 20, 2008 08:00am

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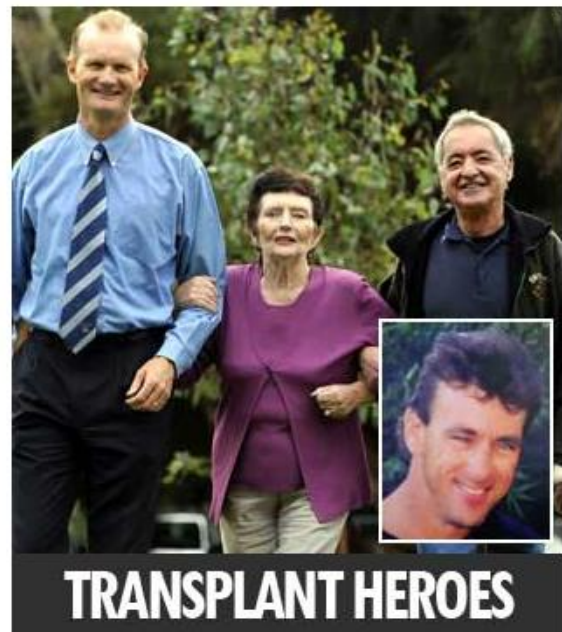
Mr Axford's organs saved the life of 44-year-old Perth schoolteacher Sean Henderson and 62-year-old handyman Milton Roberts.

They now share a bond that stretches beyond the usual bounds of family and friendship.

While Maureen and her family were absorbing the news of this death, the lives of Mr Henderson, then 40, and Mr Roberts, then 58, hung in the balance.

From beds within the same hospital, Sean received Michael Axford's liver and Milton his heart.

They are all now advocates for organ donation and they all keep in contact with each other. They are willing to share their emotional story to help demystify the issue of organ donation and encourage others to register for donation.



TRANSPLANT MIRACLE: Sean Henderson, left, who received a liver transplant, with Maureen Virgo, and Robert Milton, who received a heart transplant from Michael Axford, (inset) who died suddenly on Boxing Day, 2004. Picture: **Stewart Allen**

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<http://www.news.com.au/perthnow/story/0,21598,23894022-2761,00.html>

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This week they welcomed Health Minister Jim McGinty's announcement that the State Government would hold a summit within the next few months to increase the number of organ donors in WA.

Between January and April, just eight West Australians donated their organs, and 29 people have received organ transplants but not necessarily from WA donors.

While many donor families may not want or need to know the recipients of their loved one's organs, Maureen Virgo experienced an overwhelming urge to find who had received her son's organs.

Luckily, Sean and Milton experienced the same need and through various strokes of good luck, these three and their families managed to make contact.

Sean, Milton and Maureen were allowed to write letters to each other, but they were not allowed to reveal more than their first names. Letters were passed on via DonateWest, the WA agency for organ and tissue donation.

In a fluke conversation with another heart transplant recipient about six months after Michael's death, Maureen discovered that this man probably went to the same gym as Milton and he passed Maureen's details on for her. Milton immediately phoned.

"There was all sorts of emotion when he phoned. Milton would have died. He couldn't even walk or do anything. He came here and by this time we had written about 4 or 5 letters to each other and I didn't hesitate to invite him here," said Maureen.

"When I see Milton and hug him I can feel the heart beating and that's a beautiful feeling and I am glad something good can come from Michael's death."

Milton, who is a maintenance yard worker for the Whitfords Hotel, went from being on "death row due to heart failure" to working out in the gym just three days after his operation. He wanted to thank someone.

"That was the first thing that crossed my mind you know. From feeling so sick and then to feel so well and I just had to know. I went through the Doctors and carers and I asked them and they said I could write a letter and after a few letters Maureen and I got in touch and I went to meet Maureen."

Their relationship is now a very close one and Milton would encourage anyone to register for organ donation.

"It is indescribable and I wouldn't be here now. I am living a normal life. I can lift 65kg kegs at work."

Sean Henderson, assistant to the deputy headmaster and teacher at Hale School, said meeting Maureen was part of the recovery process for him.

"Obviously I thought of me and my family and that we have been lucky, but I thought of Maureen and she is so positive about it as well and that is important.

"It was very emotional but for me I wanted to help her and her family out if that was one of her aims and I wanted to say a huge thank you. It has not been easy, but I wanted to learn more about Michael."

"He was only 38 when he died. There are some recipients who don't want to know but I wanted to find out. She has also gained from seeing someone like me get a lot better."

Sean, his wife Nicole and their children Ella, 18 and Bridget, 16, will be forever indebted to the young man they never met.

Although Sean also communicated with Maureen via letters, about a year after his operation he and Nicole went to the library and looked up death notices and found her surname.

"She wanted to be found and it didn't take long to track her down once we decided to do it. It was a huge relief for Maureen."

A former member of the Australian under 19 Australian cricket team which toured England in 1983 with future Test stars Craig McDermott, Ian Healy and cricket-AFL all-rounder Craig Bradley, Sean suffered an auto-immune disease for more than two decades prior to the transplant.

A cancerous legion was also found on his liver when it was removed, which could also have endangered his life.

"I was still teaching and running -- I had done a 5km run the day I got the call - I had no idea about what time span I would have had."

Maureen said that while she, Milton and Sean did not see each other all the time, they knew each other was there when needed.

About 650,000 West Australians have currently registered to donate their organs.

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A lovely story to hear. The big thing about organ donation is to make sure that family and friends understand if you are ever unfortunate enough to be in this position that you want your organs to be donated. I have made sure that all know, it is in my will, I am a registered donor, I keep it in my purse. My husband, mother, siblings and friends have all been told. Does this seem morbid? No... My father died unexpectedly and unfortunately as he had no such election, it was left to my mother who was not in an emotional state to say yes. It was a decision which saddened me, but I understood her needs also. If Dad had made it known, I'm sure my Mother could have confirmed this decision at the time.

*Posted by: **Fiona of Perth** 3:32pm today*

Maureen Virgo, the world needs more people like you. In your moment of hurt and grief at losing your son, your thoughts were to save others who were fighting for their lives. Maureen you are a great human and a great Australian. I salute you.

*Posted by: **khadeer of Perth** 3:16pm June 20, 2008*

I'm 22 and have now registered my organs for donation. I hope many people who have not yet done so will do the same.

*Posted by: **Amy of perth** 3:15pm June 20, 2008*

My partner is a organ donor and after we tragically lost him at the age of 40 it does give you hope that he has given life to five people with one who had 48 hours to live. The organs taken were his heart, lungs, liver and both kidneys and each person has been given a second chance thanks to a kind hearted man who not only gave in life but also at his passing. The hardest part at the time of the tragedy was to even think of organ donation although now his death does not seem so final. We at this point have not met the organ recipients and after reading your story we as a family would like to embrace them as you have. I have kept in contact with the Donor Co-coordinator to ensure all recipients are in good health as this has been my focal point to try in any possibly way to ease the pain of the tragedy. My only advise for others is make this a topic of conversation at your dinner table with family and friends and inform everyone of your wishes and make it very clear that this is your wish. I was lucky that I had this conversation with my partner and although at the time I was hesitant as I was still living in hope I knew that I could not deny him of his wish. I could not be selfish and think of

what I wanted. Thankfully due to granting his wish five people now have the chance to life a full healthy life. I was ignorant to the fact of organ donation although now my family and friends are all on board to ensure we can all help others. Thank you so much for your story. I wish you all happiness and good health, your son like my partner are inspirations that hopefully will inspire others.

*Posted by: **Jen** 12:11pm June 20, 2008*