



understanding brain death

Understanding Brain Death

You are at the hospital because something serious has happened to a member of your family. The pain or grief you are feeling about your loved one's condition can make it difficult to understand everything that you are being told by the doctors and nurses.

Some medical terms might be unfamiliar to you, including brain death. You may have discussed brain death with your loved one's doctor, but you still may be unsure about what it means. Here is an explanation.

There are two ways to pronounce death. It may be pronounced when a person's heart stops beating *or* when the brain stops functioning.

The brain cannot survive without oxygen. Brain death occurs when blood and the oxygen it carries cannot flow to the brain. Without blood and oxygen, the brain dies. When the brain dies, the person cannot move, breathe, think or feel. Pain or suffering cease.

Brain death is death, and cannot be reversed. The heart can continue to beat for awhile as the ventilator (breathing machine) provides oxygen to the body. It may look as if the person is sleeping because the ventilator fills the lungs with oxygen and helps keep the skin color normal and warm. They are not sleeping.

Many tests are performed by the doctor to determine if brain death has occurred. Most or all of these tests take place at the person's bedside. If the tests prove that brain death has occurred, the person is dead. The doctor then records the time of death while the person is still on the ventilator and their heart is still beating.

It is important that you understand brain death so that you can make important decisions as needed about your loved one. More questions may arise when talking with family or friends. Be sure to discuss any concerns with your loved one's doctors or nurses.

