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The secret to persuading someone to donate their organs

[National News](#)

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Sharing knowledge ... The man behind Spain's organ donation success is in Australia to train our doctors. Picture: istock *Source: istock*

THE secret to getting a family to donate a loved one's organs is never to ask them that question says the man behind the world's most successful organ donation program.

Spain's Dr Rafael Matesanz is in Australia to teach Australian doctors about leading practices in organ donation as controversy rages over Australia's falling donation rate.

He says the doctors most successful at generating organ donations are great listeners.

"The worst thing you can do is directly ask for organs," he says.

"The people who are experts say what is important is not so much how to speak, it's how to listen," he says.



Right and wrong way to do it ... Don't ask for an organ donation if you want a family to agree says Dr Matesanz. Picture: Supplied. *Source:* News Limited

"Take time to understand what they have lost, a mother or a father, let them explain how they are feeling and on many occasions the family will volunteer organ donation," he says.

The time of day also matters. Organ donation requests are more likely to fail if they are made during the night than during the day he says.

Organ donation rates hit the spotlight earlier this year when *Sunrise* Star [David Koch](#) [spectacularly quit as chair of the government's Organ and Tissue Authority's advisory council live on air.](#)

His resignation came after Assistant Health Minister Fiona Nash called an inquiry into the donation program.



Live on air ... David Koch quit the government's Organ and Tissue Advisory Council when an inquiry was called into the program. Picture: Liam Kidston. *Source:* News Corp Australia

Problems emerged when a performance report showed the number of deceased organ donors fell three per cent from 391 to 378 in 2014, and transplant recipients also decreased by one per cent.

This was despite a \$240 million funding injection and reform program introduced in 2008.

While Spain has organ donation rates of 36 per million population, Australia's rate is just 16.1 per million population.

There are around 1700 people languishing on transplant waiting lists in Australia and many die before they receive an organ.

Dr Matesanz says the key to Spain's success is having 189 trained transplant co-ordinators in major hospitals.

In addition 16,000 intensive care and emergency department doctors have received training in identifying potential organ donors.



Doing it differently ... Thousands of doctors in Spain have received training in identifying potential organ donors. Picture: News Corp. *Source:* News Limited

“Practically the whole hospital should collaborate because you are trying to save lives,” he says.

Forty per cent of relatives in Australia refuse to donate their loved ones organs, Spain has a refusal rate of just 18 per cent, in some hospitals it is as low as five per cent.

Spain has more intensivists in their hospitals which frees them up to spend more time with patients and with families of potential donors, Dr Matesanz says.

Another key difference is Spain uses more organs from people over the age of 60.

While it is true these organs may not last as long as those from a younger patient they are generally given to older recipients and can extend their lives by 10 years, he says.

This frees up other organs for younger patients.

“In Australia I don’t think it’s a matter of doing things wrong, you need to do more things,” he says.



Changes needed ... Assistant Health Minister Fiona Nash has called an inquiry into Australia's organ donation program. Picture: Brendan Radke *Source: News Corp Australia*

"You should do more to gain the involvement of critical care doctors, the message to all intensivists is this is a very important part of their job," he said.

He says he does not think Spain's opt out organ donation system is a factor in that country's success, Australia has an opt in donation system.

At the end both systems require the family to give consent, he says.

Australia ranks 20th in the world for organ donation and just 1.8 million Australians are registered to donate organs.

Lobby group Sharelife has been calling for more reforms to the system, it argues doctors specially trained to counsel grieving relatives and persuade them to donate a loved one's organs are side tracked to other duties in busy hospitals.

Sharelife director, nurse and academic Holly Northam whose PHD focused on the issue says Australian hospitals do not capture all the possible organ donors.

When patients identify themselves hospital staff don't know what to do or who to notify, her research found.

Mr Koch has dismissed Sharelife's calls as "tripe" and branded them "a bunch of rich lobbyists".