

Health, even life can be donated

SANTA CRUZ — In the mid-'70s, local architect Lou Lang was going blind.

His corneas, the transparent tissue which covers the eye's lens like a watch crystal, were weakening, and the pressure inside his eyes was pushing the corneas out of shape.

He couldn't keep corrective lenses in his eyes, and his ophthalmologist told him his vision could simply go at any time, "like somebody pulling the shade.

"It was only a matter of time before I was legally blind," he said Friday, "and they don't pay much for blind architects."

But today, Lang and others like him can see again.

Someone gave their eyes, and through a corneal transplant, gave Lang back his sight.

Every day in Northern California, thousands of potential organ and tissue donors die, but because of a lack of information, those who desperately need the tissue and organs to save their health — or their life — go without.

"Ten patients who were waiting for heart-lung transplants at Stanford have have died in the past few months because of a lack of donor," Phyllis Weber told a group gathered at Community Hospital on Friday. Some 600 people in Northern California need liver transplants, she said, and up to 200 are waiting for corneas to restore their sight.

Weber and Lynn Bohart are representatives of the Northern California Tissue Bank, a regional organization in San Francisco which serves Northern California and parts of Nevada.

The two came to Santa Cruz to drum up publicity for transplants, and educate those in a position to locate and carry the message to potential donors.

Representatives from the Santa Cruz Police Department, the sheriff's office the Highway Patrol, Dominican Hospital and the Red Cross gathered to listen to them, and to Santa Cruz ophthalmologist Dr. Stephan Plager talk about transplants and donations.

There are 11 parts of the body which may be used in transplant operations: heart, lung, kidneys, bone, cartilage, the middle ear, corneas, the sclera or white part of the eye, the fibrous brain lining,

muscle sheath and the pituitary gland.

Transplant banks traditionally have specialized in a specific organ. Northern California Transplant Bank, which has merged with the Lion's Eye Bank, handles all but whole body donations for research, and is one of the country's largest tissue and organ banks.

It coordinates, procures and processes the tissues and organs for transplant or use in reconstructive surgery. They match the donors with recipients.

In tissue removal, specially-trained technicians remove the tissues. They are prepared and stored until used. Each must be handled differently.

In major organ transplants, after the body is declared brain-dead according to strict legal criteria, a team of physicians transport it, still on life-support systems, to the site of the operation.

When a potential donor is located by a highway patrolman, mortician, coroner doctor or nurse, a call is made to the bank. The decision must be made within hours of death, or the tissues and organs can't be used.

Weber told of a man in Carmel who attempted three days before his father's death to contact someone about donating tissue. He called more than 10 agencies before he accidentally found someone who carried a donor card on his driver's license.

These donor cards are supplied by the Department of Motor Vehicles. The card must be filled out completely, the woman said, with the holder's signature and those of two witnesses, or it is invalid.

Anyone who is age 18 or older may be a donor. Those younger need parental permission. The family may or next of kin may give permission for organ and tissue removal over the telephone. Written permission may also be given.

Dr. Plager, who says about 25 transplants are done annually in Santa Cruz, said, "Before the bank was established, we had great difficulty getting donations. Even today, I have patients who have to wait up to five months for corneas because of such poor public awareness."

For further information, call (415) 563-4321.

Court report