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HUMAN TISSUE--NOT ORGAN--TRANSPLANTS ARE THE MORE COMMON

DALLAS--When most people hear the word transplant, they usually conjure up dramatic images of a struggle between life and death.

But Ellen Heck wants to make potential donors aware that transplants of major organs such as the heart and lungs aren't the only types of transplants being used to save or improve lives.

Heck, director of the Transplant Services Center at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas, knows that human tissue transplants are equally as meaningful and could be more plentiful.

While the heart, lungs, liver, pancreas and kidneys offer renewed hope for some, tissue transplants also help to bring normalcy to the lives of those who have lost their sight because of corneal diseases or relief to burn victims who have lost the top layers of skin.

"Most people tend to think transplants are done only with major organs," Heck said. "But we do tissue transplants almost daily with various tissues, including skin, corneas, bone and cartilage. Bone is probably the most frequently transplanted tissue."

UT Southwestern's Transplant Services Center, a major tissue procurement facility in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, collects corneas, skin, bone, bone marrow, cartilage, tendons, blood vessels and fascia, the fibrous tissue that covers muscles.

"We could spend a lot of time enumerating the uses for all the various types of tissues that we have," Heck said. "But for all the uses of tissue, there are never enough donors. If you ask which is

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the organ or tissue for which there is a shortage of donors, obviously it is the one you are waiting for."

When it comes to organ and tissue donations, Heck said families have three primary concerns. "The first is that the family is concerned with what the donor would have liked to do," she said. Following that, family members worry whether procurement of the organs or tissues will delay funeral arrangements and whether the removal of the donor organs and tissues will leave visible signs.

Heck said family members can be assured that the procurement procedure will not delay funeral services and will not interfere with viewing the body. Cosmetic reconstruction is performed at the time of procurement, she said.

Heck said she appreciates the amount of humanitarianism in general. "Even though they are in pain and grieving, families often want to help," she said. "They often say, 'We would like for this death to have a meaning.' And for them it helps a little to find that positive point in a sad situation."

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NOTE: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School, affiliated teaching hospitals and outpatient clinics.