



End-of-Life Conversations

ORGAN DONATION

This guidance supports healthcare professionals to communicate effectively, compassionately, and confidently with families during end-of-life care, including situations where organ donation may be discussed. It is grounded in communication research and clinical practice, and focuses on skills that reduce distress, build trust, and support informed decision-making.

1 Preparation is essential

- Review clinical information and gather information on the family's situation.
- Consider any cultural, religious, or language needs; involve interpreters or spiritual supports where appropriate.
- Choose a quiet, private, comfortable environment.
- Consider seating and power dynamics.

3 Use nonverbal communication deliberately

- Open body posture, steady eye contact, and a calm, unhurried pace.
- Facial expressions and gestures that convey warmth and attention.
- Lean in to show engagement.
- Make careful, respectful use of touch when appropriate.
- Remain composed, especially if families express anger, mistrust, or distress.

2 Start by building rapport

- Warm greetings, appropriate introductions, explain roles.
- When first describing staff roles, don't mention organ donation – introduce it later, and more gently.

..., she's a specialist nurse who works with family members when their loved one is at end-of-life.

- Check how family members wish to be addressed.
- Express sincere condolences.
- Outline broadly what the conversation will involve, e.g. 'talking about what might happen next', and seek permission to proceed.



Making conversations easier

4 Demonstrate empathy without overclaiming

Empathy means recognising and validating emotions, while being careful not to claim full understanding. Use language that:

- Acknowledges how difficult the situation may be.
- Names emotions as an educated guess.

It looks like you're very sad and very tired.

- Validates reactions as understandable.

People in your situation often find this hard to take in.

- Allows space for emotion without trying to 'fix' it.

5 Gather before you give

Before sharing information or raising sensitive topics:

- Encourage family to talk about what they know and believe, and what is important to them.

Would you tell me from your perspective what's happened to Áine?

- Listen actively and without interruption.
- Identify misunderstandings, gently clarify.
- Attend closely to verbal and nonverbal cues, noticing if people seem in shock or unable to take information in.
- This stage of the conversation can build trust and help you tailor information to the family's needs.

6 Provide information step-by-step

When delivering bad news or introducing organ donation:

- Use warning shots to prepare – they tell family that something sensitive is on its way.
- Forecast: tell the story of what has happened so far, step by step, towards the current situation.

I'm going to raise something with you that's very sensitive, and can be difficult to talk about.

- Speak clearly, avoid jargon, and be unambiguous.

Yes, I am very sorry to say Áine's brain was damaged so much that she is now no longer alive.

- Give information slowly, in small chunks, check understanding.
- When discussing organ donation:
 - Focus on the patient's wishes,
 - Clearly explain processes, safeguards, and choices.

We're at a stage where it's possible that Áine could donate her organs, so we would like to ask you to consider this on Áine's behalf.

- Emphasise it is voluntary and that care, dignity, and respect continue regardless of the decision.

Some people worry that what they decide about organ donation will affect the care their loved one receives. However...

7 Close the conversation clearly and supportively

- Summarise key points and decisions.
- Encourage raising of questions or concerns.

I've given you a lot of information.

What questions do you have for me?

- Explain next steps and timelines.
- Reinforce ongoing support and availability.
- Thank the family, offer condolences again.

