

Louise with daughter Maisie, aged 19 months



Thank you my dear donor...

Without a liver transplant, Louise Whitmore, 33, from Runcorn, Cheshire, wouldn't be here today. Here, she writes a letter to her anonymous donor

Never will I know what made you do it, but, at some point in your life, you decided you wanted your organs to be donated after you died. And I will be eternally grateful that you did.

Too few people get around to putting pen to paper and making this selfless wish official. But, I first realised how important this is when a dear friend of mine died of a brain tumour. She was 60 – and all her organs went to people who were younger than me. I was only 20 at the time but the experience shocked me into immediately registering as a donor.

My liver – our liver – cannot be used again, but I hope that surgeons will one day find use for some other parts of me that I currently take for granted. Because what happened to me was one of those unexpected things in life that none of us ever imagines, let alone plans for. And, without your signature on the transplant register, I wouldn't be telling this story.

It all started last February. Married to John, with a baby daughter – one-year-old Maisie – life was good. One of my colleagues in human resources had been off with a bug, and, when I suddenly became sick too, I assumed I had the same thing. A week later, still feeling nauseous, I thought I could just talk myself back into feeling better, so set off for work, checking my make-up in the rear-view mirror. Which is when I noticed that my eyes looked yellow. Worried, I called the GP, and I ended up at the surgery within the hour –

1000 people die waiting for a transplant every year **4%** of people



Louise and John are happier than ever, thanks to her donor



Louise and John's wedding day in June 2013

then straight off to Halton Hospital for tests, and called into Warrington Hospital two days later.

When both Hepatitis A and liver cancer were ruled out, I imagined I was out of the woods. I didn't register the seriousness of my eventual diagnosis – a very rare liver disease called seronegative hepatitis. Two days later – a Thursday – I was sent home and warned that, should I become confused or slurry, I was to return to hospital immediately. Although I felt fine, I was getting yellower by the day, and by the Monday, John was worried enough to call an ambulance.

I was sent to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham – a transplant centre. My family were told I needed a new liver. I must have been told too, but I was too ill to take it in. The medics knew it was just a matter of time before I would develop hepatic encephalopathy – inflammation of the brain, caused by acute liver failure. Only then could I go on the super-urgent transplant list.

I was warned the first tell-tale sign would be an involuntary flicking of my fingers. It happened when I was in the loo, four days after arriving in Birmingham. My head and face were swelling, too. I was rushed to ITU,?? and put on ventilators and dialysis, until my new liver – your liver – was found.

It took longer than the doctors hoped to get a match, and there was a point when my family were warned I may become too ill for the transplant to take place. I know now that everyone had come to say

goodbye, sure they were going to lose me. Fortunately, I was too ill to know what was happening.

But my seven-hour operation was faster than most. My liver had become so small and shrivelled it was easily removed, and your liver immediately turned a gorgeous shade of pink – a sign it was rapidly filling with blood from the massive transfusion I needed during the operation.

The surgeon later told me he was thrilled at how quickly my body responded. But I was initially shocked when he told me you had been an elderly donor. How much longer could your liver be expected to live? And that was when I discovered the most amazing thing – that livers constantly renew themselves and within a fortnight it would have become like the liver of a 32-year-old.

Nobody knows what caused my sudden illness – but the doctors say my blood must have somehow become infected some time after having Maisie, because I wouldn't have been well enough to carry a baby to term.

All I know is that without the kind actions of people like you, I would not have held my daughter in my arms again.

Your gift was indescribably special. But it took me a while for the penny to drop

PASS IT ON...

To join the NHS Organ Donor Register, visit www.organdonation.nhs.uk, call 0300 123 2323 or text JOIN to 84880. You can also register when filling out applications for a driving licence, passport or Boots Advantage Card, joining a new GP practice, or obtaining your European Health Insurance card. Remember to tell those closest to you what you've done.

that the organ that had saved my life meant that someone else had lost theirs. And that, as my family were rejoicing to see me go from strength to strength, another family was grieving a devastating loss.

Why it didn't occur to me straight away, I do not know. But it was only when the transplant coordinator visited me, and mentioned that I may want to write and thank my donor's family, that I realised how many other people's lives would have been affected by what had happened to me.

It was several months before I was ready to write. I didn't want my gratitude to be too gushing. I was painfully aware that my new life came at the

expense of their terrible loss. But, after visiting the ward where I'd been treated, I was ready to close that page of my life story. And the words I wrote to your family came easily. I don't know if they will read my letter, or respond, and I will not be disappointed if I never hear. But I still remember the comfort my friend's husband got from hearing that his wife's organs helped so many young people get back on with their lives. And if your family ever wonders, "What became of...?" the answer is there, in an envelope from me. With all my heart I thank you for saving my life – not everyone who needs a liver is so lucky.'

give blood **26%** have joined the NHS Organ Donor Register