

# CHAIN OF SOLIDARITY

*Luxembourg-based liver transplant patient Étienne Bischops received a new liver 20 years ago: but he remembers it as if it were yesterday*

## **Why did you need a transplant?**

At the age of 18, I was diagnosed with a rare liver disease for which there is no cure. It is a disease which has long periods of remission, and after the initial flare-up at 18 I didn't suffer any difficulties until I was 32 years old. Then, suddenly, it struck again. At the time, the doctors gave me only three or four years to live.

## **This must have been a horrible moment.**

Actually, the doctors were very positive and encouraging from the outset. They explained to me that I could benefit from a liver transplantation and connected me with a former patient with the same disease who had been transplanted five years previously. This took away a lot of the fear. However, the doctors also told me it could take at least six months before I could expect to receive a suitable organ. I turned out to be very fortunate and within a month I received a call from the transplant coordinator. I therefore never had to experience a long and stressful wait.

## **How did you experience the events?**

They called on a Sunday, at around eight in the evening. I kind of mentally shut down and instantly went on auto-pilot. I left as soon as I could: they told me I should be there within two-and-a-half hours and the journey to the hospital was almost a two-hour drive from my house.

## **What were your thoughts at that time?**

I tried to be in a positive state of mind. I saw the transplant as a great opportunity to end my illness. I was also very aware that somewhere at the same time there was a donor and a bereaved family: I was not the one to be most pitied on that evening. I arrived at 22.30. Within two hours I had some final examinations and received medication – I was covered with an antibiotic lotion to ward off any infection. And then, after waiting for a further hour, I was wheeled into the operating room...

## **What happened when you woke up?**

I was on a cocktail of very heavy drugs, so I was not

exactly compos mentis! The surgeon, who had operated on me during the night and was continuing with his normal day of work, immediately came to confirm that the operation was successful. This was a huge relief.

## **Did you think of your donor at that time?**

No, not really at that specific moment. I was in intensive care with some pain and discomfort. At such moments, you only think of yourself – you're not very philosophical.

## **What was it like to leave the hospital?**

It was surprisingly a difficult transition. After one month in hospital, you end up getting used to the constant and reassuring medical supervision. Once at home, you may feel disoriented and vulnerable. It also takes time to recover psychologically. I quickly realised though that the remote supervision was just as attentive: my doctor even called late on a Saturday evening to suggest a slight modification to the immunosuppressive treatment!

## **Did you later begin to think about your donor?**

Definitely. A few months after the operation, I learnt that he was less than 20 years old. That was painful to hear. He

didn't have enough time to live a full life. I asked myself how it made sense that such a young person had to die. During several months, I really wanted to know who he was, and be able to express my gratitude to his family. I discussed it with a doctor who took the time to listen to me and told me something I have not forgotten: "Sometimes it is better to leave certain questions unanswered". What I know for sure, is that my donor was a generous person, raised in a generous family; and that's probably the most important there is to know.

That was the moment when I decided to accept the transplantation as a gift. I also started taking part in sporting events, as a way to promote organ donation, but also to honour the memory of my donor and to thank donor families.

## **What kind of sports did you do?**

Mountain climbing and cycling. Such sporting events included climbing the Gran-Paradiso which is 4,000 metres high, or cycling from Brussels to Lisbon with a joint team of transplant patients, transplant coordinators, doctors, physiotherapists, and members of staff from Eurotransplant. Sport events



are a wonderful way to convey a positive message about organ donation, and also to demonstrate the full rehabilitation of transplant recipients. A lot of people believe that after a transplantation there are not a lot of possibilities in your life anymore. But no! After a transplantation, you can lead again a normal, healthy life. There is even an Olympic snowboard champion who has had a liver transplant.

## **Do you continue to think of your donor every day?**

Not really every day – after all it's now been 20 years since the operation. But nevertheless, especially on happy occasions, I regularly tell myself 'I am only able to experience this moment because of my donor'.

## **How do you feel when you look back at that time?**

I remain incredibly grateful for everyone involved in the long chain of solidarity that made my transplantation possible: the donor and his family, the doctors, the nurses, the transplant coordinators. You cannot call it a miracle because it is technically possible, but it feels like a miracle to me! 🙏