

In Memoriam: James S. Wolf, M.D.

The OPTN, UNOS and Donate Life America mourn the passing of James S. Wolf, M.D. His life was integral with the field of organ transplantation – as a transplant surgeon, a passionate advocate for organ donation and a transplant recipient. Dr. Wolf served in many capacities with the OPTN and UNOS, including a term as OPTN/UNOS Treasurer in 1987-1988, OPTN/UNOS President in 1990-1991, and UNOS' Director of Medical Affairs from 1994 to 2000. He also was a founder and first president of the Coalition on Donation (now Donate Life America).

Dr. Wolf earned his medical degree from the University of Illinois. He completed his training in surgery and transplantation in the early 1960s at the Medical College of Virginia (now VCU Health System) under Dr. David Hume, one of the pioneers of organ transplant surgery. He served as Chairman of the Division of Surgery at McGuire Veterans Administration Hospital in Richmond, Va., from 1968 to 1976. He was an influential adviser and supporter during the formation of UNOS in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

He relocated to Northwestern University Medical School and served in several capacities until 1994, including Professor of Surgery, Chairman of the Division of Transplantation and Associate Dean of Medical Education. He also served as President and Medical Director of the Regional Organ Bank of Illinois (now Gift of Hope), the organ procurement organization serving most of the state of Illinois.

Dr. Wolf was particularly skilled at promoting collaboration among disparate professions and disciplines. He was among the earliest of transplant professionals dedicated to public education in support of organ donation. Both with the Regional Organ Bank of Illinois, and later with the Coalition on Donation, Dr. Wolf consulted with national experts in advertising and marketing to develop messages that the public would accept and act on to become organ donors. In his honor, Donate Life America established the “Dr. James S. Wolf Courage Award” in 1999 to recognize individuals who have played a significant national role in educating the public about organ and tissue donation.

Dr. Wolf resigned from UNOS due to heart disease and ultimately received a heart transplant at the Texas Heart Institute in 2001. He noted proudly that despite his influence in the transplant field, the allocation system he helped develop treated him the same as any other candidate throughout his eight-month wait for a donor heart.

Dr. Wolf was a friend of, and mentor to, countless transplant professionals. He will be missed for his optimism, his foresight and his commitment to serving the needs of donor families and transplant recipients alike.