

‘Brain dead’ Quebec woman wakes up after family refuses organ donation (Rebecca Millette)

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Last week, Madeleine Gauron, a Quebec woman identified as viable for organ donation after doctors diagnosed her as “brain dead,” surprised her family and physicians when she recovered from a coma, opened her eyes, and began eating.

The 76-year-old woman was hospitalized at the Hospital Sainte Croix de Drummondville for an inflammation of the gums, which required a brief operation. During her recovery, hospital staff gave the elderly woman solid food, which she had been unable to consume in her family home for some time, and left her unattended. Choking on the food, she fell into a coma, after unsuccessful resuscitation.

Medical staff contacted her family, explaining to them that their mother was “brain dead,” with no hope of recovery. Citing Gauron’s eyes as particularly viable, the doctors asked if the family would agree to organ donation.

While supporting the possibility of donation, her shocked family first demanded further medical tests to prove Gauron was really dead.

The next day, the family was astonished to learn that Gauron had awakened. Shortly afterwards, she sat up in bed and ate yogurt.

“If we had decided to donate her organs, they would have killed her,” said her son.

“It makes no sense to treat people like that. Although she is 76 years old and is ill, she did not have to suffer all this,” insisted her daughter.

Madeleine Gauron is now able to eat, walk and talk, and immediately recognized her family. Her children have decided to take legal action against the hospital.

As anecdotes similar to Gauron’s continue to pile up, “brain death” as a legitimate diagnosis of actual death is increasingly being questioned by concerned family members and medical professionals, some of whom have charged that the “brain death” criteria was created simply to ensure that harvested organs are fresh.

Currently, more than half of Swedish intensive care nurses who care for purportedly brain dead patients have doubts about methods for establishing brain death, according to a recent survey released by Sahlgrenska Academy at the University of Gothenburg.

While regulations require Swedish physicians to ascertain brain death through particular clinical tests, further analysis in conjunction with brain x-rays are only done for select patients.

The author of the thesis, Anne Flodén, a registered nurse and researcher at the Institute of Health and Care Sciences, said the outcome of the study was problematic, indicating the need for clear guidelines surrounding the process of diagnosis and organ donation.

“This problem was raised by many of the ICU nurses in several of the studies,” said Flodén. “They were disappointed in the lack of structure and guidelines and are therefore calling for more support from management on these issues.”