

Acquisition of Donor Traits by Heart Transplant Recipients¹

Ten cases reported by Pearsall, Schwartz, and Russek

Case 1

The donor was an 18-year-old boy killed in an automobile accident. The recipient was an 18-year-old-girl diagnosed with endocarditis and subsequent heart failure. The donor's father, a psychiatrist, reported:

My son always wrote poetry. We had waited more than a year to clean out his room after he died. We found a book of poems he had never shown us, and we've never told anyone about them. One of them has left us shaken emotionally and spiritually. It spoke of his seeing his own sudden death. He was a musician too, and we found a song he titled "Danny, My Heart is Yours." The words are about how my son felt he was destined to die and give his heart to someone. He had decided to donate his organs when he was 12 years old. We thought it was quite strong, but we thought they were talking about it in school. When we met his recipient, we were so . . . we didn't know like what it was. We don't know now. We just don't know.

The recipient reported:

When they showed me pictures of their son, I knew him directly. I would have picked him out anywhere. He's in me. I know he is in me and he is in love with me. He was always my lover, maybe in another time somewhere. How could he know years before he died that he would die and give his heart to me? How would he know my name is Danielle? And then, when they played me some of his music, I could finish the phrases of his songs. I could never play before, but after my transplant, I began to love music. I felt it in my heart. My heart had to play it. I told my mom I wanted to take guitar lessons, the same instrument Paul [the donor] had played. His song is in me. I feel it a lot at night and it's like Paul is serenading me.

The recipient's father reported:

My daughter, she was what you say . . . a hell raiser. Until she got sick, they say from a dentist they think, she was the wild one. Then, she became quite quiet. I think it was her illness, but she said she felt more energy, not less. She said she wanted to play an instrument and she wanted to sing. When she wrote her first song, she sang about her new heart as her lover's heart. She said her lover had come to save her life.

Case 2

The donor was a 16-month-old boy who drowned in a bathtub. The recipient was a 7-month-old boy diagnosed with tetralogy of Fallot, a syndrome involving a hole in the ventricular septum, displacement of the aorta, pulmonary stenosis, and thickening of

1 Excerpted with permission from Pearsall, P, Schwartz, G E R, and Russek, L G S (2002), Changes in Heart Transplant Recipients That Parallel the Personalities of Their Donors. *Journal of Near-Death Studies* 20 (3), © 2002 Human Sciences Press, Inc. At present this paper is available at the website of *Nexus* magazine under the title "Organ Transplants and Cellular Memories." ↗

the right ventricle. The donor's mother, a physician, reported:

The first thing is that I could more than hear Jerry's [her son, the donor] heart. I could feel it in me. When Carter [the recipient] first saw me, he ran to me and pushed his nose against me and rubbed and rubbed it. It was just exactly what we did with Jerry. Jerry and Carter's heart is 5 years old now, but Carter's eyes were Jerry's eyes. When he hugged me, I could feel my son. I mean I could feel him, not just symbolically. He was there. I felt his energy.

I'm a doctor. I'm trained to be a keen observer and have always been a natural born skeptic. But this was real. I know people will say that I need to believe my son's spirit is alive, and perhaps I do. But I felt it. My husband and my father felt it. And I swear to you, and you can ask my mother, Carter said the same baby-talk words that Jerry said. Carter is 6, but he was talking Jerry's baby talk and playing with my nose just like Jerry did.

We stayed with the [recipient family] that night. In the middle of the night, Carter came in and asked to sleep with my husband and me. He cuddled up between us exactly like Jerry did, and we began to cry. Carter told us not to cry because Jerry said everything was okay. My husband and I, our parents, and those who really knew Jerry have no doubt. Our son's heart contains much of our son and beats in Carter's chest. On some level, our son is still alive.

The recipient's mother reported:

I saw Carter go to her [the donor's mother]. He never does that. He is very, very shy, but he went to her just like he used to run to me when he was a baby. When he whispered "It's okay, Mama," I broke down. He called her Mother, or maybe it was Jerry's heart talking. And one more thing that got to us. We found out talking to Jerry's mom that Jerry had mild cerebral palsy, mostly on his left side. Carter has stiffness and some shaking on that same side. He never did as a baby and it only showed up after the transplant. The doctors say it's probably something to do with his medical condition, but I really think there's more to it.

One more thing I'd like you to know about. When we went to church together, Carter had never met Jerry's father. We came late and Jerry's dad was sitting with a group of people in the middle of the congregation. Carter let go of my hand and ran right to that man. He climbed on his lap, hugged him, and said "Daddy." We were flabbergasted. How could he have known him? Why did he call him Dad? He never did things like that. He would never let go of my hand in church and never run to a stranger. When I asked him why he did it, he said he didn't. He said Jerry did and he went with him.

Case 3

The donor was a 24-year-old female automobile accident victim. The recipient was a 25-year-old male graduate student suffering from cystic fibrosis who received a heart-lung transplant. The donor's sister reported:

My sister was a very sensual person. Her one love was painting. She was on her way to her first solo showing at a tiny art shop when a drunk plowed into her. It's a lesbian art store that supports gay artists. My sister was not really very "out" about it, but she was gay. She said her landscape paintings were really representations of the mother or woman figure. She would look at a naked woman model and paint a landscape from that!

Can you imagine? She was gifted.

The recipient reported:

I never told anyone at first, but I thought having a woman's heart would make me gay. Since my surgery, I've been hornier than ever, and women just seem to look even more erotic and sensual, so I thought I might have gotten internal transsexual surgery. My doctor told me it was just my new energy and lease on life that made me feel that way, but I'm different. I know I'm different. I make love like I know exactly how the woman's body feels and responds — almost as if it is my body. I have the same body, but I still think I've got a woman's way of thinking about sex now.

The recipient's girlfriend reported:

He's a much better lover now. Of course, he was weaker before, but it's not that. He's like, I mean he just knows my body as well as I do. He wants to cuddle, hold, and take a lot of time. Before he was a good lover, but not like this. It's just different. He wants to hug all the time and go shopping. My God, he never wanted to shop. And you know what? He carries a purse now. His purse! He slings it over his shoulder and calls it his bag, but it's a purse. He hates it when I say that, but going to the mall with him is like going with one of the girls. And one more thing: he loves to go to museums. He would never, absolutely never, do that. Now he would go every week. Sometimes he stands for minutes and looks at a painting without talking. He loves landscapes and just stares. Sometimes I just leave him there and come back later.

Case 4

The donor was a 17-year-old African-American male student, a victim of a drive-by shooting. The recipient was a 47-year-old Caucasian male foundry worker diagnosed with aortic stenosis. The donor's mother reported:

Our son was walking to violin class when he was hit. Nobody knows where the bullet came from, but it just hit him and he fell. He died right there on the street hugging his violin case. He loved music and his teachers said he had a real thing for it. He would listen to music and play along with it. I think he would have been at Carnegie Hall someday, but the other kids always made fun of the music he liked.

The recipient reported:

I'm real sad and all for the guy who died and gave me his heart, but I really have trouble with the fact that he was black. I'm not a racist, mind you, not at all. Most of [my] friends at the plant are black guys. But the idea that there is a black heart in a white body seems really . . . well, I don't know. I told my wife that I thought my penis might grow to a black man's size. They say black men have larger penises, but I don't know for sure. After we have sex, I sometimes feel guilty because a black man made love to my wife, but I don't really think that seriously. I can tell you one thing, though. I used to hate classical music, but now I love it. So I know it's not my new heart, because a black guy from the 'hood wouldn't be into that. Now it calms my heart. I play it all the time. I more than like it. I play it all the time. I didn't tell any of the guys on the line that I have a black heart, but I think about it a lot.

The recipient's wife reported:

He was more than concerned about the idea when he heard it was a black man's heart. He actually asked me if he could ask the doctor for a white heart when one came up. He's no Archie Bunker, but he's close to it. And he would kill me if he knew I told you this, but for the first time, he's invited his black friends over from work. It's like he doesn't see their color anymore, even though he still talks about it sometimes. He seems more comfortable and at ease with these black guys, but he's not aware of it.

And one more thing I should say. He's driving me nuts with the classical music. He doesn't know the name of one song and never, never listened to it before. Now, he sits for hours and listens to it. He even whistles classical music songs that he could never know. How does he know them? You'd think he'd like rap music or something because of his black heart.²

Case 5

The donor was a 19-year-old woman killed in an automobile accident. The recipient was a 29-year-old woman diagnosed with cardiomyopathy secondary to endocarditis. The donor's mother reported:

My Sara was the most loving girl. She owned and operated her own health food restaurant and scolded me constantly about not being a vegetarian. She was a great kid — wild, but great. She was into the free love thing and had a different man in her life every few months. She was “man crazy” when she was a little girl, and it never stopped. She was able to write some notes to me when she was dying. She was so out of it, but she kept saying how she could feel the impact of the car hitting them. She said she could feel it going through her body.

The recipient reported:

You can tell people about this if you want to, but it will make you sound crazy. When I got my new heart, two things happened to me. First, almost every night and still sometimes now, I actually feel the accident my donor had. I can feel the impact in my chest. It slams into me, but my doctor said everything looks fine. Also, I hate meat now. I can't stand it. I was McDonald's biggest moneymaker, and now meat makes me throw up. Actually, when I even smell it, my heart starts to race. But that's not a big deal. My doctor said that's just due to my medicines. I couldn't tell him, but what really bothers me is that I'm engaged to be married now. He's a great guy and we love each other. The sex is terrific. The problem is, I'm gay. At least, I thought I was. After my transplant, I'm not. . . I don't think anyway. . . I'm sort of semi- or confused-gay. Women still seem attractive to me, but my boyfriend turns me on. Women don't. I have absolutely no desire to be with a woman. I think I got a gender transplant.

The recipient's brother reported:

Susie's straight now. I mean it seriously. She was gay and now her new heart made her

2 This case illustrates why many cases go unreported. When the Caucasian foundry worker received the heart of a 17-year-old African-American student, he presumed that the donor would have preferred rap music. Hence, he dismissed the idea that his new radical change in preference for classical music could have come from the heart of the donor. However, unbeknownst to the recipient, the donor actually loved classical music, and died “hugging his violin case” on the way to his violin class.

straight. She threw out all her books and stuff about gay politics and never talks about it any more. She was really militant about it before. She holds hands and cuddles with Steven just like my girlfriend does with me. She talks girl talk with my girl friend, where before she would be lecturing about the evils of sexist men. And my sister, the Queen of the Big Mac, hates meat. She won't even have it in the house.

Case 6

The donor was a 14-year-old girl injured in a gymnastics accident. The recipient was a 47-year-old man diagnosed with benign myxoma and cardiomyopathy. The donor's mother reported:

Look at her [showing picture]. My daughter was the picture of health. There wasn't an ounce of fat on her. She was a gymnast and her coach could lift her above his head with one hand. She was so excited about life that she would just hop and jump all the time like a kitten. She had some trouble with food, though. She would skip meals and, for a while, she was purging. I think they would call her a little anorexic. We took her to therapy about it, but she just wasn't much into food. And she had this silly little giggle when she got embarrassed. It sounded like a little bird.

The recipient reported:

I feel new again. I feel like a teenager. I actually feel giddy. I know it's just the energy of the new heart, but I really feel younger in every way, not just physically. I see the world that way. I'm really young at heart. I have this annoying tendency to giggle that drives my wife nuts. And there's something about food. I don't know what it is. I get hungry, but after I eat, I often feel nauseated and that it would help if I could throw up.

The recipient's brother reported:

Gus is a teenager. No doubt about that. He's a kid — or at least he thinks he's a kid. Even when we're bowling, he yells and jumps around like a fool. He's got this weird laugh now. It's a girl's laugh and we tell him that. He doesn't care. His appetite never did bounce back after the surgery. He's pretty much nauseated almost all the time. After Thanksgiving dinner — and he loved it — he went upstairs and vomited. We took him to the emergency room, but it wasn't anything to do with his new heart. They said it was probably a reaction to something in the meal. None of the rest of the family got sick, though. He's going to have to watch it. His doctor is concerned about his weight.

Case 7

The donor was a 3-year-old girl who drowned in the family pool. The recipient was a 9-year-old boy diagnosed with myocarditis and septal defect. The recipient's mother, who knew who the donor had been, reported:

He [the recipient] doesn't know who his donor was or how she died. We do. She drowned at her mother's boyfriend's house. Her mother and her boyfriend left her with a teenage babysitter who was on the phone when it happened. I never met her father, but the mother said they had a very ugly divorce and that the father never saw his daughter.

She said she worked a lot of hours and wished she had spent more time with her. I think she feels pretty guilty about it all . . . you know, the both of them sort of not appreciating

their daughter until it was too late.

The recipient, who claimed not to know who the donor was, reported:

I talk to her sometimes. I can feel her in there. She seems very sad. She is very afraid. I tell her it's okay, but she is very afraid. She says she wishes that parents wouldn't throw away their children. I don't know why she would say that.

The recipient's mother further reported about the recipient:

Well, the one thing I notice most is that Jimmy is now deathly afraid of the water. He loved it before. We live on a lake and he won't go out in the backyard. He keeps closing and locking the back door. He says he's afraid of the water and doesn't know why. He won't talk about it.

Case 8

The donor was a 19-year-old woman who suffered a broken neck in dance class. The recipient was a 19-year-old woman diagnosed with cardiomyopathy. The donor's mother reported:

We've met Angela [the recipient], and she is the image of our daughter. They could almost be twins. They're both bright girls; I mean, my daughter was bright, too. She wanted to be an actress, but we thought she had too much academic potential for that. Her father is a doctor and really wanted her to follow in his footsteps.

The donor's father reported:

Stacy [his daughter, the donor] was extremely bright. It's so tragic. She would have made an outstanding physician, but she wanted to dance and sing. That's how she died. She fell in dance class. We always argued good-naturedly about how disappointed I would be if she went to Hollywood instead of Harvard. I hope she knew I just wanted her to be happy.

The recipient reported:

I think of her as my sister. I think we must have been sisters in a former life. I only know my donor was a girl my age, but it's more than that. I talk to her at night or when I'm sad. I feel her answering me. I can feel it in my chest. I put my left hand there and press it with my right. It's like I can connect with her. Sometimes she seems sad. I think she wanted to be a nurse or something, but other times it's like she wanted to be on Broadway. I think she wanted to be on Broadway more. I want to be a nurse, but I could be a doctor too. I hope she will be happy, because she will always be my angel, my sister in my chest. I carry my angel with me everywhere.

The recipient's mother reported:

We can sometimes hear her talking to her heart. It's like a "Dear Diary" thing. She puts her hand on her chest and talks to who she thinks her donor is. Once, we found her holding a stethoscope to her chest to try to hear her new heart. I think she still does that sometimes. And the only other thing is that she really wants to go to medical school now. She never wanted to do that before, but that's because I don't think she thought she would live. She's already changed her college classes.

Case 9

The donor was a 3-year-old boy who fell from an apartment window. The recipient was a 5-year-old boy with septal defect and cardiomyopathy. The donor's mother reported:

It was uncanny. When I met the family and Daryl [the recipient] at the transplant meeting, I broke into tears. We went up to the giving tree where you hand a token symbolizing your donor. I was already crying when my husband told me to look at the table we were passing. It was the [recipient's family] with Daryl sitting there. I knew it right away. Daryl smiled at me exactly like Timmy [her son, the donor] did. After we talked for hours with Daryl's parents, we were comforted. It somehow just didn't seem strange at all after a while. When we heard that Daryl had made up the name Timmy and got his age right, we began to cry. But they were tears of relief because we knew that Timmy's spirit was alive.

The recipient reported:

I gave the boy a name. He's younger than me and I call him Timmy. He's just a little kid. He's a little brother like about half my age. He got hurt bad when he fell down. He likes Power Rangers a lot, I think, just like I used to. I don't like them anymore, though. I like Tim Allen on "Tool Time," so I called him Tim. I wonder where my old heart went, too. I sort of miss it. It was broken, but it took care of me for a while.

The recipient's father reported:

Daryl never knew the name of his donor or his age. We didn't know, either, until recently. We just learned that the boy who died had fallen from a window. We didn't even know his age until now. Daryl had it about right. Probably just a lucky guess or something, but he got it right. What is spooky, though, is that he not only got the age right and some idea of how he died, he got the name right. The boy's name was Thomas, but for some reason his immediate family called him "Tim."

The recipient's mother added:

Are you going to tell him the real Twilight Zone thing? Timmy fell trying to reach a Power Ranger toy that had fallen on the ledge of the window. Daryl won't even touch his Power Rangers any more.

Case 10

The donor was a 34-year-old police officer shot attempting to arrest a drug dealer. The recipient was a 56-year-old college professor diagnosed with atherosclerosis and ischemic heart disease. The donor's wife reported:

When I met Ben and Casey [the recipient and his wife], I almost collapsed. First, it was a remarkable feeling seeing the man with my husband's heart in his chest. I think I could almost see Carl [her husband, the donor] in Ben's eyes. When I asked how Ben felt, I think I was really trying to ask Carl how he was. I wouldn't say that to them, but I wish I could have touched Ben's chest and talked to my husband's heart.

What really bothers me, though, is when Casey said offhandedly that the only real side effect of Ben's surgery was flashes of light in his face. That's exactly how Carl died. The bastard shot him right in the face. The last thing he must have seen is a terrible flash. They never caught the guy, but they think they know who it is. I've seen the drawing of

his face. The guy has long hair, deep eyes, a beard, and this real calm look. He looks sort of like some of the pictures of Jesus.

The recipient reported:

If you promise you won't tell anyone my name, I'll tell you what I've not told any of my doctors. Only my wife knows. I only knew that my donor was a 34-year-old, very healthy guy. A few weeks after I got my heart, I began to have dreams. I would see a flash of light right in my face and my face gets real, real hot. It actually burns. Just before that time, I would get a glimpse of Jesus. I've had these dreams and now daydreams ever since: Jesus and then a flash. That's the only thing I can say is something different, other than feeling really good for the first time in my life.

The recipient's wife reported:

I'm very, very glad you asked him about his transplant. He is more bothered than he'll tell you about these flashes. He says he sees Jesus and then a blind flash. He told the doctors about the flashes, but not Jesus. They said it's probably a side effect of the medications, but, God, we wish they would stop.