

Just a Phone Call Away

Membership department stands ready to help

BY KAREN SOKOHL

Thankfully, becoming part of the vast organized network of transplant organizations across the country requires more than just hanging up a shingle.

Your OPO, transplant program or histocompatibility laboratory must first become an OPTN member, a process administered by UNOS. And, to be a member, you must have an approved program staffed with appropriate personnel—the requirements for which are spelled out in the UNOS bylaws.

As you may recall, the OPTN bylaws are currently being rewritten and reorganized into user-friendly, plain language (see March–April *Update*, p. 17). The first rewritten drafts will be distributed for their initial public review on Dec. 2. In a later step, member personnel requirements will also be incorporated into OPTN bylaws.

JUST PICK UP THE PHONE

If you aren't sure where to find the exact bylaw that affects your program, all you need to do is pick up the phone.

"We are a critical resource to members, and we talk to them every single day," said Dave Kappus, M.B.A., director of UNOS' membership department.

"We can help you understand those bylaws, and we can wade through and clarify some of the more difficult language," Kappus added. "And if for some reason we aren't able to answer your question, we'll find someone in the organization who can."

Six employees in the membership department manage and verify member applications, which reflect a variety of situations—new members, changes in key personnel, adding to existing programs, or inactivating or reactivating a program.

In addition, membership staff maintain a massive database of member demographic information, which allows UNOS staff to contact members or specific groups of transplant professionals for mailings, such as the *Update* or the e-newsletter.

An updated database is critical for effective member communication, so be sure to contact UNOS with any changes in personnel at your organization, even if it's only a change of an e-mail address.

MONITORING PERFORMANCE

In addition to the ongoing job of application and database maintenance, membership staffers rely on data provided by UNOS' research department and the Scientific Registry of Transplant Recipients (SRTR) to make sure OPTN members are meeting basic membership requirements as well as performing transplants with appropriate outcomes.

The OPTN/UNOS membership and professional standards committee (MPSC) has monitored transplant center performance

since 1993. Although the membership department's specific roles with the MPSC have evolved over the years, today members of the department serve as primary MPSC liaisons and are fully involved with the review of pre- and post-transplant outcomes.

"We like to emphasize the quality improvement and customer service side of the MPSC, not just the compliance side," said Jacqueline O'Keefe, M.B.A., assistant director of membership.

"We look at the data not just in terms of clinical significance but also in how we can help you improve your program," she added. "If your program is singled out because of lower than expected outcomes, we want to know why it's happening so we can help you learn how to perform more effectively.

"And if you're in need of intervention," O'Keefe continued, "we'll send out a peer team made up of experienced transplant professionals from other centers across the country to show you exactly what you need to do."

VITAL TO POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Perhaps not quite as obvious or well known to members is the role that the UNOS membership department continuously plays in OPTN policy and bylaw development.

"Because we are able to observe patterns of behavior, we are in a good position to see if a policy is being misunderstood or misinterpreted," O'Keefe explained. "Modifications to clarify a policy could greatly improve member compliance."

An example: Membership staff observed that requirements for approval of living donor programs needed to switch focus from the transplanting center to the living donor recovery center.

"We are intimately involved with policy development because of the very nature of what we do every day," Kappus added. "And as the field of living donation matures and grows, we need to keep a close watch to make sure that our requirements follow suit.

"The system needs to evolve along with advances in transplantation," Kappus said.

THE EVOLVING SYSTEM


OPTN policy, for example, initially required a qualified open nephrectomy living donor recovery surgeon to be immediately available for all laparoscopic nephrectomies if the expertise was found in different surgeons. It became clear, however, that it was redundant to require living donor recovery surgeons to be separately qualified in both types of nephrectomies, since a laparoscopic nephrectomy surgeon is trained and able to convert from laparoscopic to open nephrectomy if needed.

The OPTN/UNOS kidney transplantation committee endorsed that change, and new requirements have recently been approved as a result.

The membership staffers also are a resource for transplant professionals, answering questions and guiding you through your particular situation (see box below).

“A challenge,” Kappus said, “is that members sometimes don’t think about us until it’s too late. In other words, he added, “you shouldn’t start wondering about a succession plan *after* the designated primary surgeon has left your hospital.

“Call us *before* it happens, and we’ll help you develop a workable plan so you’ll be prepared and in compliance with program approval requirements.

“Early notification,” he said, “works to everyone’s benefit.” 

Note from the author: I’ve known for some time that membership director Dave Kappus spoke with a confident, booming voice. But on Aug. 23 — the day I interviewed him for this article — his words appeared to shake the earth. It was that day, in the midst of our interview, that UNOS headquarters in Richmond, Va., felt the impact of a 5.8 earthquake, the epicenter of which was 38 miles away in Mineral, Va. Membership employees, however, did not skip a beat.

Karen Sokohl is UNOS’ member communications specialist and a contributing writer.

OTHER MEMBER RESOURCES

Monthly e-newsletter. Each issue of UNOS’ monthly Communications e-newsletter (communication.unos.org) includes the recurring feature, “What UNOS Members Need to Know.” That vital section is an ever-growing repository of practical information on various hot topics.

Sample membership applications. You can find sample membership applications on the UNOS website (unos.org > [donation and transplantation](http://unos.org/donation-and-transplantation) > [membership](http://unos.org/membership) > [learn how to apply now](http://unos.org/learn-how-to-apply)). Questions? Contact the membership employee for your region, who also can send you an editable Word version.

Patient safety system portal. Oversight of aspects of living donation became an OPTN responsibility in 2006, and UNOS’ membership department was tasked with monitoring “living donor adverse events” reporting by OPTN/UNOS members through the patient safety system portal. As of this writing, 80 such cases have been reported. Understanding those deaths or diseases is a vital component of understanding living donation and keeping living donation safe for donors.

IMPORTANT CONTACT INFORMATION

I HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT...	MY REGION IS...	WHO DO I ASK?	CONTACT INFO:
APPLICATIONS	1, 2, 9, 10	Christi Wong Ana Thompson	christi.wong@unos.org , (804) 782-2982 ana.thompson@unos.org , (804) 782-4760
	3, 4, 11	Rosey Adorno Helen Morrell	rosey.adorno@unos.org , (804) 782-4927 helen.morrell@unos.org , (804) 782-4903
	5, 6, 7, 8	Leah Slife Emily Jones	leah.slife@unos.org , (804) 782-4941 emily.jones@unos.org , (804) 782-4081
PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS	1, 3, 4, 8, 9	Sheila Foster	sheila.foster@unos.org , (804) 782-4094
	2, 6, 7	JoAnn Malone	joann.malone@unos.org , (804) 782-2975
	5, 10, 11	Robyn Zernhelt	robyn.zernhelt@unos.org , (804) 782-4815
	Regions 1 – 11 (also available)	Crystal Lewis Heather Neil	crystal.lewis@unos.org , (804) 782-4887 heather.neil@unos.org , (804) 782-4747