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Coroner ‘blocked donation of my daughter’s healthy heart’

For Lady Young, the hot summer day on which her daughter, Gaia, 25, suddenly died within hours of complaining of a headache will forever be scarred into her memory.

After hosting a supper party with her mother at their family home, Gaia began violently vomiting and was taken to hospital, where she rapidly fell into a coma. She never regained consciousness.

Young has now told The Times that the pain of Gaia’s death has been compounded after discovering that her healthy heart had been cremated despite her daughter wanting it to be donated. Pathological examination records show that the heart was normal, with valves and arteries in perfect working order when she died after her brain inexplicably swelled and caused a cerebral edema.

Specialists were able to retrieve her kidneys and liver but for reasons known only to the coroner, he blocked NHS staff from removing her heart. Young’s emails to the coroner’s office in search of answers have received no response. She believes it was a mistake and is further evidence of mistreatment after an inquest found that her daughter should have had a CT scan upon arrival at hospital.

Instead doctors believed that she may have been inebriated despite Gaia, daughter of the late Labour peer Lord Young of Dartington, not drinking excessively or ever taking drugs. A coroner at an inquest later found that a CT scan could have saved the life of the Bristol University graduate.

Young, 64, spoke of her devastation after her daughter’s heart was “wasted” and believes the coroner mistakenly thought there was something wrong with it. She said: “When she died everything happened so quickly and it wasn’t until afterwards when I looked up the medical records that I suddenly realised that Gaia’s heart was not transplanted.

“There was a note saying the coroner had put a stop on her heart being harvested, preventing it from being used to help someone else. There was no suggestion that there was anything wrong with her heart, it was her brain that had been the problem.

“We asked the coroner why the heart was not donated and they would not give us a reason. The chief coroner said it was nothing to do with them.”

Young believes that the coroner mistakenly took Gaia’s respiratory arrest to be a cardiac arrest, and ordered the heart not to be transplanted. After Gaia was officially declared to be exhibiting no brain activity, her mother signed the paperwork to say that her organs could be removed, in line with her daughter’s wishes.

“They even did something called life donation, which meant they removed the organs while Gaia’s heart was still beating — it makes them better for donation. It’s a traumatic image, like something from Frankenstein,” she said. “Then to find out she went through that but without the heart being taken is just awful. A perfectly good heart was wasted. Gaia’s wishes were that her organs could help someone else and this is a final sadness.

“It seems so unfair — actually quite cruel — in such a sensitive topic and in such a vulnerable time for the bereaved. I feel completely motivated by knowing the truth. I wanted to understand what had happened to Gaia. I felt very much left out. When Gaia was in the hospital nobody called me. The first doctor called me effectively after Gaia had died, when she was brain dead. But I was not told that, I was just told that she was in a coma.”

Young says the situation was made even worse as Gaia was her only child, whom she had raised her on her own since her husband died when their daughter was six.

“She was everything for me. I had invested everything in her and within a few hours she was gone,” she said. “Now I have found out this about her heart, it makes me wonder how often this is happening, I imagine there are other families.”

Young launched a campaign after her daughter’s death for answers after the hospital failed to diagnose that her brain was swelling.

On the morning of July 17, 2021 Gaia had gone on a bike ride and hosted a party for friends in the garden of the family home in north London. But that evening Gaia suffered a sudden severe headache and violent vomiting. She was taken to University College London Hospital as a precaution, but by the following afternoon her condition had deteriorated so rapidly she was in a coma.

This month Lord Hunt of Kings Heath raised the issue in parliament on behalf of Young, questioning whether a coroner is required to explain their indications regarding what organs can be donated. Lord Bellamy, under- secretary of state in the Ministry of Justice, issued a response: “It would be inappropriate for . . . the government to comment on, or intervene in, the coroner’s decisions in an individual case.”

After Gaia’s death, Young obtained her daughter’s medical records, which read: “Restricted agreement was given for retrieval of lungs, liver, kidneys, pancreas, multi-visceral, corneas and tissue. They have said no to heart retrieval.”

Anna Mazepina, PA for the Inner North London coroner, told The Times: “I am sorry, but the coroner would never comment on the case outside the court. This is incompatible with their judicial role.”

