

China transplants raise suspicion

Executed inmates stripped of organs

By Audra Ang
Associated Press

XI'AN, China — Clutching a grimy tote bag filled with legal documents and photos of her executed son, Meng Zhaoping is trying to argue her way past a security guard at the provincial high court for the second day in a row.

All she wants is an audience with a court officer, she says. All she has are two questions: Why was her son put to death? What happened to his body?

The answer to the first question is in the charge sheet: He killed a man to death in a brawl. The second answer, she is convinced, lies in a much-criticized Chinese practice — taking organs from executed prisoners for transplant surgery.

"Let me talk to someone! Give me justice!" Meng shouts as the guard blocks her way.

Ever since her son was convicted and executed in January 2005, Meng has been searching for an explanation. She never saw his body. His corpse, tagged No. 207, was put in a hospital van and taken to a crematorium.

By then, Meng believes, the body had been stripped of its organs.

"It would be unbelievably cruel to take his organs. It's the final insult," Meng says later.

She has no direct evidence to back up her belief, but the secrecy in which China has shrouded the whole issue has long bred suspicions, with foreign medical and human rights groups saying it is profit-driven and indifferent to medical ethics.



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Meng Zhaoping, right, and her daughter Wu Junjie visited Xi'an in China's Shaanxi province to seek answers about the execution of Meng's son. Meng believes her son's body was stripped of its organs for use in transplants.

What's new is that these critics are being joined by ordinary Chinese such as Meng, a 53-year-old apple farmer from the fringe of the Gobi Desert.

Over more than two years, Meng has made a dozen trips to this city in north-central China, borrowing money for the 46-hour train trip from the family farm. She has journeyed even farther, to Beijing, seeking central government intervention.

Each time she has been shunted among government agencies. In March, she said, officials in her hometown of Kuitun prevented her from leaving. "Ordinary people like us are like ants. The system just steps on them and destroys them," says Meng.

Much of the furor surrounds the use of organs — mostly kidneys, livers and corneas — from executed prisoners who may not have given their permission.

In the United States, federal prisons ban inmates from donating organs except to a close

relative. States ban the transplanting of organs from death row prisoners, and occasional moves by some states to ease the ban have failed.

Though few involved in China's transplant trade talk openly about it, Beijing has begun to respond to criticisms.

Twice in the past two years, Vice Health Minister Huang Jiefu has publicly acknowledged that China routinely removes organs from executed prisoners for transplants — but only with prior consent.

This month the State Council, China's cabinet, formalized Health Ministry rules issued last year that ban the sale of organs and require donors to supply written permission.

But the regulations do not mention prisoners. -

Organ donations rare

Outside the prison population, voluntary organ donations are rare. China's Confucian heritage holds that the body be kept intact out of respect for parents and ancestors.

Health officials say the country faces a severe organ shortage, estimating that 1.5 million people need transplants in China each year, and that only about 10,000 operations are carried out.

But China's high number of executions — at least 1,770 people in 2005, according to Amnesty International — means organs could be readily available.

Wealthy Chinese and foreigners are willing to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars. Brokers stand ready to arrange transplants in weeks rather than the months or years it often takes in the West.

It raises a question: Might China be executing prisoners to stock the organ market?

"There's a very clear demand, and where there's a demand, there's a market," says Henk Bekedam, head of the World Health Organization's China office.

"This is a market that needs to be very strongly regulated in order to guide it properly."