

Organ donations aren't keeping up

Serious shortage has experts searching for solutions

By Joyce Howard Price
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The availability of organs for transplantation is falling further and further behind every year as the waiting list for donations grows faster than the supply.

"The transplant waiting list is growing by 15 percent per year, but the number of donors has increased by just 5 percent per year," says Dr. Richard J. Howard, medical director of the University of Florida's Organ Procurement Organization and a professor of surgery in UF's College of Medicine.

He and other experts concerned about the dearth of donor organs and tissue say this shortage has been worsened by the high success rate of transplantation. "The problem with creating successful new procedures is that it makes the shortage worse by increasing the number of people who are transplant candidates," said Dr. Howard.

And while polls show 85 percent of Americans favor the concept of organ transplantation, and between 70 and 90 percent know of the need for donor organs, approximately half of U.S. families approached at the time of a relative's death refuse to donate, says Bob Spieldenner, spokesman for the Richmond-based United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS).

He noted that the number of organ donors rose 5.6 percent in 1998. "That was the first substantial increase since 1995, but it still doesn't come close to how much the waiting list is growing," Mr. Spieldenner said.

"We only did 20,961 transplants last year, about 900 more than the previous year," he said.

But the year ended with 64,423 patients still waiting for transplants. "We were able to do about 1,000 more transplants [because of the increase in donors], but the waiting list went up 10,000," Mr. Spieldenner said. "Meanwhile, 5,000 people died while waiting for transplants."

UNOS sees waiting lists for donor organs — especially livers and kidneys — continuing to climb. Given the prevalence of hepatitis C infection in the United States, Mr. Spieldenner said the waiting list for liver transplants "could tri-

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—Dr. Richard J. Howard, University of Florida medical school

ple or rise fivefold in the next 15 years."

It's a situation that now has many scrambling to find answers to why some people sign donor cards or agree to the use of a loved one's organs, and why many others say no. The shortage has even prompted some to call for financial incentives to encourage organ donations — something that's long been considered taboo.

Starting next year, at least one state, Pennsylvania, will begin offering a payment of \$300 to help families of organ donors with funeral expenses. Mr. Spieldenner said the money would not be paid to the donor's relatives but to funeral homes.

Mr. Spieldenner stressed that it's illegal to buy or sell organs in the United States under the 1984 National Organ Transplant Act. "It's a thin line between reimbursement and incentives," he said, adding that "everyone wants to see" how Pennsylvania's pilot program, which will be monitored by medical ethicists, affects prevalence of organ donation in that state.

Dr. Howard suggested various ways to increase organ donation rates in a recent article in the Journal of the American College of Surgeons. He said it "may be worth establishing a small number of pilot programs to test the efficacy of financial incentives on organ donations." He acknowledged "current law may have to be changed or, at least, waived for such pilot programs."

In the article, Dr. Howard said minorities donate organs at a lower rate than non-Hispanic Caucasians. "Yet, in many regions of the country, African-Americans represent a disproportionate number of individuals awaiting kidney transplantation," he wrote.

He notes that family members

of potential organ donors are asked to make these decisions during the difficult time when they are reeling from an unexpected death. Factors in consent are race, religion, socioeconomic status, relationship among family members, attitude toward death, understanding of brain death, the timing of the request, the manner of the request, and the treatment a prospective donor and his family have received from medical personnel, Dr. Howard said.

"There may be myths, suspicions and beliefs about organ donation that may have to be overcome," he said. Some of the most common concerns, he said, are: that the donor's religion does not permit organ donation or that the donor would not go to heaven if some organs are missing; that brain death is reversible and that it's being declared only for the purpose of transplantation; and that the organs of a minority person will be given preferential placement in a white recipient.

Dr. Clive O. Callender, chairman of the Department of Surgery at Howard University Hospital and director of its transplant center, said such "myths still persist." But he said there's been a significant rise in organ donations by blacks in the past decade, which he attributed to extensive community-based education and outreach efforts.

"In the '80s, among African-Americans, there were eight organ donors per 1 million population. Today, the rate is 28 donors per 1 million," said Dr. Callender. He also noted that a decade ago only 3 percent of black transplant recipients got their donated organs from other blacks. Today, he said that proportion is 25 percent.

Dr. Callender, founder and principal investigator for the National Minority Organ Tissue Transplant

ORGAN SHORTAGE

Although organ transplants have increased since 1990, the number of patients waiting for new organs has grown even larger:

Year	Number of organ transplants	Patients on waiting Lists*
1990	15,462	21,914
1991	16,203	24,719
1992	16,629	29,415
1993	18,293	33,394
1994	19,043	37,684
1995	20,246	43,937
1996	20,503	50,130
1997	20,994	56,716
1998	21,926	64,423

*As of Dec. 31 of each year. As of April 30 of this year, there were 66,906 people on waiting lists.

Source: United Network for Organ Sharing

The Washington Times

Education Program, said his group takes its organ donation message to a variety of public forums, such as "churches, health fairs, beauty salons."

It's toughest to get through "when someone has lost a loved one," he said. But Dr. Callender said relatives may respond favorably when informed their "next of kin can keep 20 or 30 people alive" through organ, tissue, and bone transplants.

He also praised the policy of the Washington Region Transplantation Consortium, which allows families of organ donors to meet the recipients of "hose organs." "That should be a national role model," the liver transplant surgeon said.

The federal government also has taken steps aimed at increasing organ donations. In December 1997, the Clinton administration began a campaign aimed at making people aware of the need to inform family members and others of their decisions to be organ donors. And new regulations implemented last year require hospitals to report all deaths to organ procurement organizations.

The Department of Health and Human Services predicts organ donations could rise 20 percent over the next two years as a result of those changes. Mr. Spieldenner declines to speculate on the accuracy of those predictions. "We'd take any increase," he said in a telephone interview.