

Changing world views on transplantation

Transplantation is maturing as common clinical practice the world over, but transplant programs are constrained by an overwhelming disparity between surgical candidates and the number of transplant organs available, according to participants at last month's International Congress of the Transplantation Society in Barcelona, Spain. Furthermore, as programs continue to evolve, in some countries, transplant teams find themselves confronting multiple cultural and governmental factors that stifle the flow of organs into the clinic.

For example, the lack of a law defining brain death and outlining donor consent requirements has made cadaveric donor organs scarce in Japan (see *Nature Medicine* 2, 835). Although a bill was introduced in the Japanese Diet in 1994, controversy over patient consent held up its approval. Finally, an appointed ethics

panel added a clause requiring written consent to appease conservative legislators, and the bill is expected to become a law sometime this year. According to Hiroshi Takagi, chairman of the department of surgery at Nagoya University School of Medicine, although the logistics of obtaining written consent from a potential organ donor may be difficult, Japanese transplant physicians are glad to have the government support.

A previously legal commercial organ trade in India created a corrupt climate that now undermines the country's newly adopted definition of brain death. Altruistic donation is a foreign concept to the general public, and since the law was passed, the number of transplants has decreased even as morbidity due to renal failure has increased. However, Indian doctors felt the legislation was greatly needed and hope that the trend

will change for the better.

Unlike programs in the United States and Europe, no organization tracks the number of transplants performed or coordinates organ trafficking in the regions of Asia or the Middle East, except for the Saudi Center for Organ Transplantation (SCOT). Heralded as a "shining beacon" by transplant surgeon Abdul Daar (Muscat, Sultanate of Oman), SCOT has an efficient organ trafficking system as well as financial and political backing. Daar hopes that other Middle Eastern countries will follow the Saudi example and see the benefits of supporting such a program (for example, the saving of lives and the cost effectiveness of kidney transplant over long-term dialysis).

Some Middle Eastern cultural beliefs significantly decrease public willingness to donate organs. Despite the fact that the Islamic religion has embraced the concept of brain death, Egyptian fundamentalists are strongly opposed. When rabbis in Israel asked that doctors match Jewish donor organs with Jewish recipients, the Israeli transplant physician organization declined, saying "We do not treat Jews and Arabs; just patients."

In Latin America, cultural resistance to organ donation seems to be changing. Historically, the number of living donors greatly exceeded cadaveric kidney donors (from 1970 to 1988, 71 percent came from living donors). However, in 1994 the ratio inverted (only 48 percent from living donors), a trend that has persisted. The gradual increase in cadaveric donations has come from the larger countries, including Argentina, Brazil and Chile. Changes in governmental policies and transplant program structure, as well as mass education efforts, have occurred throughout the continent, so it is difficult to know why cadaveric donation increased. Some areas are adopting the very successful "Spanish model," which employs a professional counselor trained to deal with grief-stricken families and to routinely peruse regional hospital ICU wards looking for donor candidates. Edward Santiago-Delpin, a professor at the University of Puerto Rico has promoted the model's adoption because Spain has the highest cadaveric kidney donation rate in the world (about 30 per million population).

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The power of myth

Illegal trafficking of stolen human organs may seem an unlikely prospect, yet false claims of organ and cornea theft have attracted intense media attention throughout the world. The "child organ-trafficking myth" plagues the transplant community by inducing a reluctance to volunteer scarce available kidneys, hearts and livers for organ grafts



In 1995, a television program aired in France depicting the saga of a blind Brazilian boy. The boy, Jeison, allegedly had his eyes stolen so thieves could sell his corneas for transplant. The program gave credence to a folk myth that had arisen as a result of public anxieties about the practice of transplantation. The television series received France's most prestigious journalism award, which prompted the Brazilian government to fly Jeison to France for examination. Three eminent physicians reported Jeison lost his sight due to disease, not cornea thieves. However, the award committee did not withdraw the prize, although they expressed strong reservations. The series' producer, Marie-Monique Robin, published a commercially successful book on the topic (photo).

Similar organ theft rumors have had a direct impact on organ donation. For example, when Spain awarded their prestigious Juan Carlos Prize to a Brazilian journalist who wrote a series of articles on Jeison and other rumored incidents, the Spanish National Transplant Organization showed a sharp decrease in organ donation.

The heinous nature of the claims has prompted international groups such as the World Health Organization to conduct investigations and to release statements opposing the practice. Despite the fears, no one has unearthed any concrete evidence that eyes are being stolen or that children are being kidnapped and killed for their organs. However, the myth is so powerful it led to a brutal attack in 1994 on an American tourist beckoning to a small boy in the Guatemalan village of San Cristobal.

Todd Leventhal of the US Information Service refers to the rumors as "silent killers," because of their adverse impact on organ donation. The stories were boosted during the Cold War by Soviet intelligence, which saw promotion of such rumors as a way to help undermine Latin American alliances with the United States.

B.N.