

THIS MONTH MS TACKLES THE DONOR ORGAN DEBATE

- WHICH SIDE GETS YOUR HEARTFELT SUPPORT?

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THE British medical profession has a problem on their hands; worldwide, the ability to transplant organs from one human to another is increasing – and some astounding advances have been made, as evidenced from the recent trachea transplant performed in Spain. Stem cell technology has proved that we can now perform transplantations without the risk of organ rejection and life-long immunosuppression. So what's the problem? Quite simply, we do not have a sufficient organ supply, resulting in the death of a thousand patients on donor waiting lists each year. Switching to a system of presumed consent, as has been proposed by the Government and various medical bodies will not solve our problem.

At present, nearly 15 million adults in the UK

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LAST year 3,235 people had their lives saved or improved by an organ transplant. 2,381 of those received their organs from deceased donors, of which there were 809. All of this is very good news indeed, and shows that the healthcare teams involved made very efficient



carry donor cards, yet of those that die each year, only a fraction will produce a viable organ. Many will die in circumstances that render their organs useless but more importantly, our co-ordination of organ retrieval is somewhat patchy, leading to further organ loss. We only need to look abroad to see that the determinants of organ donor rates are complex; while Spain, with its opt-out system, has one of the highest rates in the world, other countries who apply a system of presumed consent, such as

use of donated organs. They had to.

Last year 506 people in the UK died waiting for a transplant. They died in a country which had all the resources necessary to give them a life-saving operation. The funds were there, the doctors were there, the equipment was there, and the organs were there. The majority of these deaths were entirely avoidable.

While surveys consistently show that 90% of the British public support

Belgium and France, have equal rates of organ donation to the USA – which like the UK and Ireland, still retains an opt-in system.

Our current system allows relatives to block patients' decisions to have their organs transplanted – and in my view this is essential. The reasons for choosing not to donate an organ are complex, but include religious beliefs, and the potential for additional grief at the time of death. We only need to look at the Alder Hay

organ donation and would be happy for their organs to be used in transplants, just under a quarter of eligible adults are on the Donor Register. And while the number of people in need of a transplant has risen steadily year on year, the number of donors has remained relatively static.

All that is needed to save these lives is a higher availability of donor organs. We know that the public are willing to donate (9 out of 10 of them, at least), but aren't putting this in writing. The solution seems obvious: simply transfer the burden of notification from the willing 90% to the unwilling 10%.

What easier way could there be to save lives? The BMA would agree, having pushed strongly for such a system for many years. So would Spain, Austria, Belgium, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, France, Italy and Norway, all of whom have a system of presumed consent. But of course, it's not that simple.

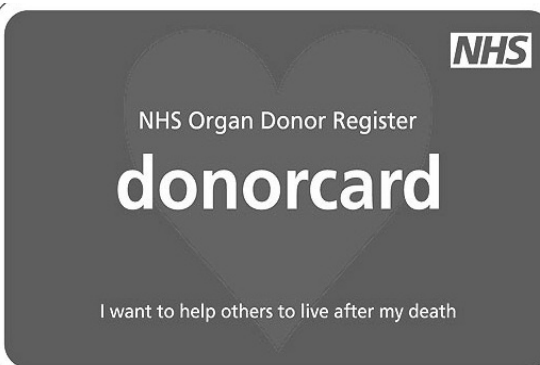
People are upset by the thought that, with an opt-out system, their bodies would by default not be under their control. The fear has been exacerbated by scandals such as the Alder Hey atrocities and also by the media's portrayal of the Orwellian "Nanny State", placing the story alongside ID cards as yet more evidence of the government "controlling every aspect of our lives" (to quote the Daily Mail). But our bodies have never

been ours to control; the final decision for organ donation is always left to the family of the deceased, donor card or no.

And clearly it is also extremely important to address the other factors that reduce organ availability, such as public awareness and misconceptions about the implications of being on the register. Nobody is claiming that an opt-out solution is the only way to increase donations, nor that it could entirely solve the shortfall on its own.

But while we speculate people are dying every day. And in the birthplace of Utilitarianism should we be standing by, debating the ethics of body ownership, when the numbers clearly demonstrate how the greatest happiness could be achieved? 90% would like to donate their organs but only 25% are on the register. 809 bodies containing viable organs were available last year but 506 people died waiting. And 64% would like to see an opt-out system in place.

So perhaps it is that simple after all.



AGAINST

scandal to realise how much emotion surrounds the issue of organ removal; at the risk of criticism, I will admit that I personally do not carry a donor card – not because I would not want my organs to be donated after my death, but because I have a parent who has expressed their devastation at the thought of having a daughter stripped of her organs. As the Government has proposed a 'soft' opt-in system, relatives will still be consulted at the time of death, and it is likely that equal numbers will still refuse organ removal.

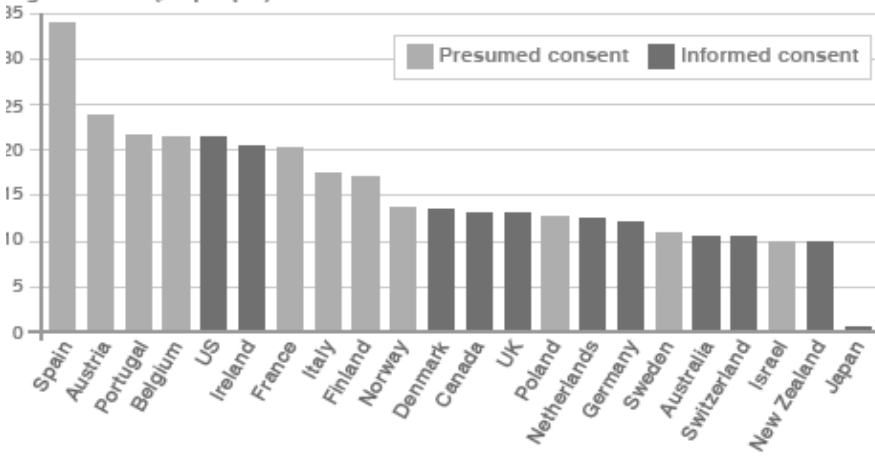
Earlier this year, the Government appointed an Organ Donation Task Force to look at these issues. In November, the Task Force reported that following much research and public consultation, changing our current sys-



tem to one of presumed consent would not on its own increase organ numbers, and would instead risk an erosion of public trust of the medical profession. They have argued that the most important factor that needs to be addressed is the organisation and co-ordination of the national transplant system, to tackle the present loss of viable organs caused by administrative problems.

The Government will also introduce a major campaign to educate the public on organ donation in an attempt to double the numbers of British adults currently on the Organ Donor Register. With the current debate on organ donation revealing so many adults who support a system of presumed consent – I question why these adults have not signed up to the Register themselves?

ORGAN DONATIONS AROUND THE WORLD (2002)
Organ donors (/m people)



SOURCE: Journal of Health Economics