

The need for mandatory organ-donor request

The past several years have witnessed spectacular improvement in the success with various forms of organ and tissue transplantation. Graft survival rates are now 80% to 90% for kidney transplantation, 80% for heart transplantation, 65% for liver transplantation, 40% for pancreas transplantation, and 90% for cornea transplantation. This progress has resulted from an enhanced technical efficacy of performing these operations coupled with major immunological advances, such as the development of cyclosporine, which have reduced the occurrence of graft rejection.

Unfortunately, while the challenge of achieving successful engraftment after transplantation has been met, coincident efforts to improve the availability of donor organs and tissues have not been as successful. In the United States, there are presently more than 8,000 patients awaiting kidney transplantation, 500 awaiting liver transplantation, 400 awaiting heart transplantation, 100 awaiting heart-lung transplantation, 5,000 awaiting cornea transplantation, 200 awaiting pancreas transplantation, while over 100,000 patients are in need of other tissues such as bone or skin. These waiting lists are increasing steadily as more candidates for transplantation are identified with no commensurate increase in the availability of donor organs and tissues.

The consequences of this acute shortage of transplantable organs and tissues have indeed been grave. They have included death for patients in need of a heart, heart-lung, or liver, interminable chronic dialysis for patients in need of a kidney, progressive debilitating diabetic complications for patients in need of a pancreas, blindness for patients in need of a cornea, and a

markedly impaired quality of life for countless others. As these patients wait and hope for a transplant operation, they require treatment for ongoing medical problems which is burdensome, often painful, and costly. The adverse economic implications of an inadequate donor-organ pool have been most clearly documented in patients with end-stage renal disease who receive reimbursement for their treatment through the national Medicare program. Several studies have shown that renal transplantation provides more cost-effective therapy than chronic dialysis and that the cost of this federally funded program, which is now almost \$3 billion per year, could be substantially reduced if more transplants were performed.

The basis for this problem is not an inadequate number of potential organ donors, but rather suboptimal utilization of the available donor-organ pool. There are approximately 20,000 suitable cadaver organ donors per year in the United States; each can provide vital organs and tissues for many patients. Yet in 1984, there were only 3,290 cadaver organ donors representing only 16% of the potential donor pool. These data are particularly distressing since public surveys have indicated that 70% to 80% of the population favors organ donation and, if asked, would consent to donate the organs of a deceased family member. Awareness of these facts in the face of an increasingly critical shortage of transplantable organs and tissues has been the basis for recent legislation aimed at alleviating this shortage.

Since 1985, a "Required Request" law has been passed in 29 states including Ohio. This law requires all acute-care hospitals to establish a protocol for identifying potential organ donors and to implement a procedure whereby trained personnel request organ donation upon a pa-

tient's death. Enactment of required request has already had a favorable impact on organ donation in several states. More recently, Congress enacted a similar law mandating all hospitals to develop a routine organ donor request protocol in order to be eligible for Medicare reimbursement.

The basis for mandatory organ donor request is not an attempt by state or federal legislators to regulate hospital and physician behavior. Rather, this legislation is the result of increasing public awareness of organ transplantation as one of the true miracles of modern medical science and a resolve at all levels of society that the benefits of this miracle be extended to as many as possible. Enactment of required request is a legislative response to a broad-based "grass roots" movement whose essence is a belief in the value of human life. This law will improve a process that allows grieving family members to offer the

gift of life to others who are severely or terminally ill. Mandatory organ donor request is an important step forward which can prolong and improve the quality of life for many patients. This approach requires and deserves the support of all health care professionals in order to be effectively implemented.

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