



Hollywood Gives Organ Donation a Bad Rap

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Editor's note: The AFRO has been a leader in Washington and Baltimore in providing coverage about organ donations and African Americans.

Inaccurate Hollywood storylines are skewing the public perception of organ donation, concluded a recent study.

These plots, including organs being sold in the black market and people with money receiving higher priority on waiting lists, are untrue, according to Susan Morgan, Ph.D., associate professor of health communication at Purdue University, located in West Lafayette, Ind., and are affecting the number of people who are registering as organ donors, especially blacks.

Blacks are disproportionately underrepresented in the organ donation pool. According to Morgan, they are also the less knowledgeable about the importance of being a donor. Television shows that present negative images and ideas about organ donation "are not helping to correct this serious problem," Morgan added.

"Unfortunately, the public is not exposed to other sources of information about organ donation [except these television shows]," Morgan, the author of the report, "Entertainment (Mis) Education" said.

In the study, Morgan examined the content of television shows including medical dramas, daytime soap operas and police and comedy shows, to see how they were portraying organ donation. According to her, Morgan found that these programs were filled with false information.

She said medical and crime shows like CBS' CSI: Crime Scene Investigation and NBC's Law and Order seem to be the main culprits of this offense. According to Morgan, a popular storyline was people being killed for their organs and they are sold to on the black market to the highest bidder.

"That is impossible in the United States; there are, problems overseas [however]," Morgan said. "It is medically impossible because you have to tissue-type match the organs to the recipient."

The study spanned two years; 2004 and 2005. Morgan said the university subscribed to a media monitoring service called ShadowTV.

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ShadowTV took all the closed caption transcripts from the network channels — ABC, CBS, NBC and FOX — and sent e-mail alerts about any dialogue pertaining to organ donation. Then, according to Morgan, the university downloaded the streaming video clips and used it to conduct its data analysis for the study.

Morgan said numerous attempts have been made to present this information the entertainment industry. Most directors, producers and writers refuse to take the meetings or incorporate accurate information in their scripts, according to Morgan.

"These writers and producers pick and choose the information they decide to incorporate," Morgan said.

"Professor Morgan's research has encouraged us to put Hollywood on alert," Tenaya Wallace, director of Donate Life Hollywood, a campaign designed to remove the "stolen-kidney" storyline and other falsehoods from television and film said in a press statement. "Now we have hard evidence that what viewers think about donation is directly related to what they see in television storylines."

Unfortunately, there has not been a public out cry to fix the false information that has been portrayed in Hollywood about organ donation — that is "why writers and producers see no need to get it right," Morgan added.

"The only way things will change is if the public gets pissed off," Morgan said. "Unless people write to these shows and voice an objection, nothing will change."

Morgan went a step further to bring attention to the issue. In a follow-up study, The Power of Narratives, Morgan revealed

that people stopped registering as organ donors because of the inaccurate storylines.

"What we found was that people's beliefs about organ donation directly mirrored the content of the episodes they had seen," Morgan said.

August 1 was National Minority Donor Awareness Day and it highlighted the urgent need for organ, tissue, cornea and bone marrow donation. Currently, according to Washington Regional Transplant Consortium (WRTC) more than 5,000 people in the Washington D.C are awaiting an organ transplant.

Two-thirds of those people are minorities and according to the Director of Community Affairs for WRTC Cindy Speas, many of them do not donate because of the "myths and misconceptions about the donation process."

"This is part of our education awareness campaign to dispel these untruths," Speas said. "We have always worked hard to counter balance this."

For more information about how you can become an organ donor, log on to www.beadonor.org

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