



PROFESSION

Lingering myths discourage organ donation

Half of Americans believe doctors will not try as hard to save their lives if they are registered organ donors, a new poll finds.

By **KEVIN B. O'REILLY**, amednews staff. *Posted May 15, 2009.*

Only 38% of licensed drivers have joined their states' organ donor registries, with many deterred by long-held misconceptions about how the transplant system works, according to poll results released in April.

The survey of 5,100 American adults, conducted on behalf of the organ-donation advocacy group Donate Life America, found that:

- 50% think that registering as organ donors means physicians will not try as hard to save their lives.
- 44% say there is a black market in the U.S. for organs or tissue.
- 26% believe that patients determined to be brain dead can recover from their injuries.
- 23% who are undecided about donation wrongly worry that age or health conditions would make them unacceptable donors.

Henkie P. Tan, MD, PhD, was taken aback by the results, which showed a slight growth in these misconceptions since a similar poll was conducted in 2004.

"The public also needs to understand that physicians will try as hard to save their life regardless if they know of their wish to be an organ donor," said Dr. Tan, director of living donor kidney transplantation at the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh's Starzl Transplantation Institute.

The results also surprised officials at Donate Life America.

"We were under the impression that these myths were dying," said the group's director, David Fleming. "We've spent a lot of time in the last two or three years making sure registries are more effective and easier to use. We probably need to take a more intentional turn back to accurately educate the public when it comes to the way the system works."

Many in the transplant community blame the popularity of these misconceptions on Hollywood movies and TV shows that wrongly portray the organ donation and transplantation process. In September 2007, a coalition of transplant organizations formed Donate Life Hollywood, a group that works with TV writers to improve accuracy on transplant-related issues.

Susan E. Morgan, PhD, professor of communication at Purdue University in Indiana, has done extensive research showing how these storylines affect people's views of organ donation. She said the transplant community needs to tackle these myths head-on in its publicity campaigns, instead of focusing primarily on the benefits of transplantation.

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