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Susan Morgan

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Professor of Health Communication

The gift of life – changing how people think about organ donation

A black market for human organs may make for an interesting plot twist, but according to Susan Morgan, Hollywood is doing more harm than good.

From TV shows to horror movies, ghastly tales of black markets and twisted physicians is an obstacle to saving lives, says Morgan, who works with a media advocacy group in California to share the real story with Hollywood writers and producers about the dangers of these scripts.

"We give them the hard numbers," Morgan says. "If you show this myth in an episode, people will be really less likely to donate."

Morgan knows this because her research shows that many people believe what they see on TV, especially because they lack other information about donation. If people don't know the truth, it hurts the 100,000 individuals nationwide at any given time waiting for an [organ transplant \(http://organdonor.gov/\)](http://organdonor.gov/).

"I had always signed up to be an organ donor and, at first, I couldn't understand why somebody *wouldn't* sign up to be a donor," she says. "About 25 percent of the population is like me and another 25 percent will likely never register to be organ donors. However, there is still 50 percent on the fence, and we want to reach those people."

Morgan, whose research has received more than \$9 million of funding, has successfully shown how crafting compelling, specific audience-targeted messages to small groups of people can do this. Instead of only using general billboards or advertisements to spread the word, she developed campaign strategies based at worksites or drivers license bureaus — both places where large groups of people can be reached through careful targeting.

Her approach worked.

Instead of a potential registrant learning about organ donation from an actor in a public service announcement, audiences hear from co-workers or people in their own communities whose lives had been affected by donation.

From her work in New Jersey, Michigan, Kentucky, Texas, Alabama and other states, she saw the number of people registering to be organ donors increase. In some areas, registration rates increased 300 percent or more.

"Even when people have accurate facts about organ donation, they still react in a more visceral way and you have to take that into account," Morgan says.

"What does work is having people meet with transplant recipients and donor families. It eases their fears and eliminates some of the myths, especially when they hear from co-workers — the people they know."

Next up for Morgan is collaborating with her colleagues to take what she learned from message development and interpersonal communication to apply to other health issues, such as colon cancer screenings.

"Many of the challenges are the same. How do we successfully communicate with different groups or people in different environments, and at the same time, how do we overcome common fears and other obstacles?"

Though she is clearly enthusiastic about addressing the challenges involved with cancer communication, the lessons learned from her organ donation research have left a lasting impact.

"With the organ donation research I can see the effects of what I'm doing," Morgan says. "The numbers show that actual lives are being saved, and that is the most rewarding research I could do."

Photos by: [Andrew Hancock \(http://www.andrewhancock.com/\)](http://www.andrewhancock.com/)

News Releases:

[Study: Personal contacts at work help people better understand organ donation \(http://www.purdue.edu/newsroom/research/2010/101213MorganOrgn.html\)](http://www.purdue.edu/newsroom/research/2010/101213MorganOrgn.html)

[Research spotlights TV portrayal of organ donations, spurs advocates \(http://news.uns.purdue.edu/x/2007b/070802MorganOrgn.html\)](http://news.uns.purdue.edu/x/2007b/070802MorganOrgn.html)

[Hollywood organ donation myths challenged at the workplace \(http://news.uns.purdue.edu/html4ever/2006/060411.Morgan.orgn.html\)](http://news.uns.purdue.edu/html4ever/2006/060411.Morgan.orgn.html)



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[Gifts of Life: Organ Donation \(http://www.redenvelope.com/guide/gifts-of-life-organ-donation\)](http://www.redenvelope.com/guide/gifts-of-life-organ-donation)

[Information on Organ & Tissue Donation and Transplantation \(http://organdonor.gov/\)](http://organdonor.gov/)

[Donate Life Hollywood \(http://www.donatelifehollywood.org/\)](http://www.donatelifehollywood.org/)

[OneLegacy \(http://www.onelegacy.org/site/index.html\)](http://www.onelegacy.org/site/index.html)

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