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Study: Personal contacts at work help people better understand organ donation

WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. – Face-to-face workplace interactions may be the best way to educate and encourage people to consider becoming organ donors, according to new research from Purdue University.

“Workplaces are a key location for people to learn about health and wellness issues, but how information is distributed in this setting can make a difference for sensitive health topics such as organ donation,” said Susan E. Morgan, a professor of communication. “There is an incredible amount of misinformation and medical mistrust surrounding the organ donation process, which is often fueled by inaccurate story lines in entertainment media. Common misperceptions include that favoritism is shown for potential recipients and people who register to be donors will receive lower-quality care.

“We found that people who had a chance to discuss the topic and their misgivings with others were more likely to sign up compared to those who just read about organ donation in a brochure distributed at their workplace.”

The findings are published in this issue of *Communication Monographs*.

Morgan and her research team coordinated campaigns for organ donation through the New Jersey Workplace Partnership for Life project at 45 businesses that ranged from 100-3,200 employees. The 10-week campaigns either consisted of a more traditional low-intensity approach, which is common in most work settings, a high-intensity approach or a control group.

In the low-intensity campaign, employees only received information from sources such as in internal newsletters, brochures or phone messages left on their voicemail systems. The high-intensity approach utilized low-intensity strategies along with on-site visits from organ procurement staff. A control group also was observed, and 9,477 employees completed pre-and/or post-campaign surveys related to their beliefs on

organ donation.

"The interpersonal interactions also were valuable because the staff was able to address people's misgivings or any confusion about the process, and the on-site visits create a bit of a spectacle because they also set up a display that included an organ donor quilt and other items that helped spark conversation," Morgan said. "Deep down, many people feel that signing up to be an organ donor is a noble thing to do, but they have these fears and they feel silly sharing those. This setting provides a more comfortable place to ask questions. When a person sees a co-worker sign up to be an organ donor it often makes them feel better about approaching the topic. This is the principle of social proof in action."

Both campaigns led to an increase in people signing up as organ donors, but an average of 11 percent of the employees at the high-intensity sites who were not already registered organ donors completed and returned their registry forms. The low-intensity campaign led to a 3-percent increase. These are 13.6 percent and 6.8 percent increases, respectively, over the control group.

"The interpersonal component led to a change, that if applied universally, could amount to approximately 11 percent of the eligible workforce signing up to be an organ donor," Morgan said. "Increases of this size potentially equate to hundreds of lives saved through donation, which translates into millions of dollars saved in health-care costs for the chronically ill people who will receive transplants."

Many of the 108,000 people who need organs are often suffering from complications related to common chronic illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension and heart disease. It is estimated that nearly 7,000 people die each year because an organ was not available. According to Donate Life America, 35 percent of Americans have signed up with an organ donor registry to ensure that after they die, their organs and tissue can help someone else.

Morgan and colleagues also will be evaluating worksite characteristics, such as location of breakrooms or spaces for posters, to determine the effectiveness of worksite health campaigns.

The article's co-authors are Tyler R. Harrison, associate professor of communication at Purdue; Lisa Chewning, an assistant professor of communication at Pennsylvania State University; Mark. J. DiCoccia, assistant chair of medical education at Indiana School of Medicine; and LaShara A. Davis, a doctoral candidate at Purdue.

The study was supported by a grant from the Health Resources and Services Administration's Division of Transplantation at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Related websites:

Susan Morgan:

http://cla.purdue.edu/communication/People/index.cfm?p=Susan_Morgan

Donate Life America:

<http://www.donatelife.net/>

Abstract on the research in this release is available at:

<http://www.purdue.edu/newsroom/research/2010/101213MorganOrgan.html>

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1. millerbrittney

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December 13, 2010 at 11:23 pm

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