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Hollywood Gets it Wrong on Organ Donation

Inaccuracies in Television Storylines May Cost Lives: Donation Groups Unite to Work with Hollywood

ANNANDALE, VA (July 31, 2007) — New research from Purdue University provides the most comprehensive study to date of organ donation storylines on television. The upshot? Hollywood is getting it wrong and costing more lives lost on the transplant waiting lists.

"During 2004 and 2005, organ donation appeared as a primary storyline on entertainment television in more than 80 television episodes in medical dramas, police shows, comedy and daytime soap operas," said Dr. Susan Morgan, associate professor of health communication at Purdue University and author of Entertainment (Mis)Education. "We found that none of these appearances presented organ donation in an accurate or positive light." The most commonly portrayed inaccuracies were black markets for organs, doctors not saving a potential donor's life, organs being stolen from people and people with money receive higher priority on waiting lists.

In a follow-up study, The Power of Narratives, Dr. Morgan goes a step further and reveals that inaccurate storylines about organ and tissue donation stop people from registering as organ donors. Viewers, especially those who had not decided if they would register as donors, were highly influenced by what they saw on TV. Unlike televised sex and violence, the public does not see a difference between Hollywood storylines on donation and reality, due to a lack of information to counter what they have learned about donation on television. This is likely to prevent some people from joining their state's donor registry (there are 40 such registries around the country). Dr. Morgan concludes with recommendations that the donation community work more closely with the entertainment industry and become more assertive to counter inaccurate portrayals of organ donation in the mass media.

"Professor Morgan's research has encouraged us to put Hollywood on alert," said Tenaya Wallace, director of Donate Life Hollywood, a campaign to eliminate the "stolen-kidney" storyline and other inaccuracies from television and film. "The organ and tissue donation and transplant community has been upset by inaccuracies in the past, but we have not taken action. Now we have hard evidence that what viewers think about donation is directly related to what they see in television storylines. This is not just about creative license. We want Hollywood writers, producers and executives to consider the public health impact of their donation storylines. That is why we are launching Donate Life Hollywood."



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"Hollywood is looking for drama and inspiration." said Wallace. "We understand that is why shows are increasingly turning to donation and transplantation as a storylines." Such scripts have appeared in medical and crime dramas like CSI: NY, Numb3rs, House, and Grey's Anatomy as well as in comedies such as Scrubs and the George Lopez Show. Heartland, the first television show focusing entirely on the donation

and transplant process debuted on TNT in June 2007. The main characters are transplant surgeons and an organ procurement coordinator.

Donate Life Hollywood will share real-life stories of donation and a Top 10 list of storylines that are most harmful to the public's perception of the donation process with writers, producers and network executives. If television shows, movies or commercials contain any of the Top 10, then Donate Life Hollywood will mobilize groups and individuals touched by donation to write letters. They will also offer praise when a show is accurate and inspirational.

"Similar efforts made a difference for how HIV and AIDS were treated in film and television in the 1980s, and breast cancer before that. Today, it also can make a difference in how organ donation is depicted," Dr. Morgan said.

More than 35 donation and transplant organizations across the country have already signed on to Donate Life Hollywood since June 15th , and more are joining every day. Our area's local organ procurement organization, Washington Regional Transplant Consortium (WRTC), has signed on as a Donate Life Hollywood Supporter. "Thousands of people in the metropolitan area are waiting for a life-saving organ, and we hope to ensure they are not waiting longer and dying at higher rates because of inaccuracies on television," said Cindy Speas, Director of Community Affairs.

More than 96,000 people are waiting for transplants and many will not receive a transplant in time. Hearts, kidneys, livers, lungs, pancreases, and small intestines can be transplanted along with many types of tissue, including corneas, heart valves and bone. Every day 18 people die in the U.S. for lack of organ donors.

For more information on research on how television impacts the public's perception of donation, contact Dr. Susan Morgan at (765) 494-9108, semorgan@purdue.edu

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📍 7619 Little River Turnpike Suite 900 Annandale, VA 22003