

Spain organ transplants get high speed rail boost

Spanish doctors to use the country's high-speed rail network to transport organs for transplant



Transplants in Spain have continued to rise despite the country's economic crisis Photo: Getty Images

By James Badcock, Madrid

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[Spanish](#) doctors are to use high-speed trains to transport organs for transplant under a new deal between the country's health and infrastructure ministries.

Spain is already the world leader in terms of donations per capita and this latest logistical advance is viewed as an opportunity to boost the number of kidney transplants in which partners from couples without compatibility donate their organs to other couples in a chain of solidarity.

“We saw an opportunity to unite engineering excellence with our branch of organisational engineering,” said Dr Rafael Matesanz, the director of Spain’s National Transplant Organisation (ONT).

Dr Matesanz is credited with transforming Spain's organ and tissue transplant industry from medical mediocrity to the envy of the world over the past 25 years.

Last year 4,360 transplants were carried out in Spain, with the deceased organ donation rate rising to 36 per million inhabitants.

In France and the United States this figure is 26, while the UK’s rate for 2013 was 21 per million inhabitants.

Impressively, transplants in Spain have continued to rise despite the country’s economic crisis, which saw public health spending fall by 11 per cent per capita between 2010 and 2013.

A symbol of the country’s boom years in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Spanish government’s commitment to expanding the AVE high-speed rail network has been criticised as an expensive luxury when unemployment stands at 24 per cent.

But for multiple kidney transplants, Dr Matesanz said using trains is the best way to ensure that the organs arrive on time, as delays are less likely than with planes.

“We are connecting two great sources of Spanish pride,” he said.

Renfe, Spain’s train operator, will appoint coordinators to guarantee the smooth transit of the cargo, accompanied at all times by a health professional from the hospital where the kidney was extracted.

The “Spanish transplant model” is based on the existence of a designated coordinator in all major hospitals who ensures that all health staff are doing their utmost to maximise the number of donations and procedures.

Around 1,000 kilometres of high-speed track is due to be opened this year, expanding the AVE network by a third.