



Organ Donation, Transplantation, and Mass Media

R. Matesanz

CADAVERIC organ shortage is the most important obstacle to more widespread provision of transplants to more patients. This shortage is not primarily the result of a lack of suitable donors but rather the result of failure to identify donors, obtain consent, and procure the organs.¹⁻³ Approaching the family represents a key point in the process and at the same time is its most sensitive element because it deals with the human drama of death. The family's refusal of organ donation remains, together with the failure to identify potential donors, the most important impediment to achieve real improvement in the rates of organ donation. Data from a Spanish multicenter national survey⁴ document a significant relationship between the degree to which the public is prepared to accept organ donation on the one hand and the conviction that transplantation is a good and positive element of health care on the other. Consequently, it is easy to understand that any negative broadcast concerning such delicate matters as brain death, organ trafficking, or fairness in the access to transplantation may adversely influence public attitude toward organ donation.

Many transplantation specialists denounce such negative broadcasts in the mass media and their effects on public opinion as one of the main causes for the deteriorating image of transplantation and the increase rates of refusals it generates among citizens and even among those health care workers not specifically involved in transplantation medicine.^{5,6}

The mass media can be useful in promoting, but also potentially dangerous in adversely affecting organ donation. There are no reasons to believe that polemic discussions concerning transplantation created by journals exclusively to promote scandal or sensationalism: they ask pertinent questions but often report wrong or imprecise answers.⁵ The same can be said with respect to the attitude of the major part of the general population, at least in Western countries. They are not "neither for nor against donation." Consequently success depends on provision of adequate information to the public in an effort to obtain the maximum possible number of organs. The final goal should be an effective system to identify potential organ donors in the places where they are actually found—in the hospitals; such procedures should be accompanied by a system of adequate information and transparency of the system's operation. In this light, what

are the most effective strategies to heighten the level of information concerning organ donation?

It is unwise to have much confidence in direct publicity campaigns aimed at the general population unless great amounts of money can be invested to make a significant impact. Such efforts would have to be on a level with those of powerful companies that spend a considerable budget on publicity.⁷ Apart from some anecdotal observations, there is no evidence on medical literature documenting that this kind of action is really able to positively influence the attitude of the public toward organ donation. On the contrary, there is a growing feeling that its practical effects are close to nil and that the cost-effectiveness ratio is very high indeed. For example, in 1987 a national survey was carried out in Australia by the Australian Kidney Foundation (AKF) addressing the general public and assessing its knowledge about organ donation and transplantation. Two years later this institution produced TV advertisements highlighting the need for organ donation that were screened over a period of 6–12 months. A national follow-up survey, undertaken in 1990, disappointingly showed unchanged opinions in the community.⁵ The scientific community, however, tends to underestimate the power and influence of the lay media, both in a positive or a negative sense.⁷ The negative impact is illustrated by some classic examples: In 1980, after only one prime-time TV current affairs program in the United Kingdom had questioned the validity of brain-death criteria (*PANORAMA*, BBC); it took 15 months for donor referral rates to recover. France and Belgium, both countries with traditionally high organ donation rates, have experienced during the 1990s a significant decrease, which was at least in part attributed to negative publicity. In the French case, publicity was given to the failure to fully inform the bereaved of procurement procedures, and in Belgium a high percentage of nonresidents on national waiting lists was publicized. Rumors concerning organ trafficking irrespective of whether true or false have achieved widespread credibility mainly because they embody some of the most

From the Health Department Tuscany Region, Florence, Italy.
Address reprint requests to Dr R. Matesanz, C/Antonio Lopez Aguado 1-10°-A-Izda, 28029 Madrid, Spain. E-mail: rafmatesanz@yahoo.es

potent anxieties of modern life, especially fears of modern technology.^{6,8} It is obvious that such adverse publicity causes enormous damage to altruistic organ donation all over the world.

On the other side, the so-called Nicholas Green effect was said to have changed for the better the Italian public opinion on organ donation. He was a 7-year-old American child, killed by a bandit near Reggio Calabria in September 1994. His parents agreed to donate his organs after being approached by Italian doctors. The positive echo in the media, emphasizing that the parents showed great generosity in the face of such violence, gave great resonance to this human drama. There is no evidence, however, that such stories can have a long-lasting effect on organ donation rates.

The Spanish experience in the 1990s is also relevant. A progressive increase in the number of organ donors has occurred since 1989, when the National Transplant Organization (ONT) was created. This is explained by the creation of a very efficient network of motivated and well-trained transplant coordinators.^{2,3,9} However, much attention has also been devoted to informing the media on issues relating to organ donation and transplantation accurately and positively. During the 1990s, the ONT took responsibility not only for coordination and guidance vis-à-vis the medical profession, but also for the provision of information to the public and the media. Several strategies have been followed in an attempt to put to optimal use the very important role of the mass media and to improve the level information of the Spanish population on these topics.¹⁰ A 24-hour transplantation hotline was established providing a single telephone number for the entire country giving instant access to the ONT. Trained professionals staff the hotline and it proved to be a simple and useful tool for improving the process of information to professional journalists and the lay public.

The Tuscany experience deserves also special mention. Specific training courses for transplant coordinators both at regional and national level have been performed with the help of experts in communication during the last years. This fact, together with other measures, has probably contributed to the significant rise experienced in this region, which now has over 30 donors per million population, more or less at the same level of Spain when this approach was first tried during the 1990s.^{3,10}

The fact that failure to detect potential donors constitutes as the principal obstacle to expanding the donor pool has important implications that also touch on the issue of communication. The first and most important group of persons in need of adequate information are health professionals, responsible for identifying potential donors and in some cases approaching grieving families.

This group is prone to be particularly influenced by negative stories in the media. Conversely, the more they feel that what they are doing is beneficial and necessary, the better and the more enthusiastically they will execute their job. This is a simple fact; it is also holds true for organ donation. The support provided to this group of professionals is essential in the communicative approach, and any future strategies to improve the situation should be directed at this group.¹¹

Both transplant professionals and individuals responsible for health care must know it is necessary to create a reliable and homogeneous system of information in which the public can have full confidence. This can only be achieved if the messages are clear, well-defined, positive, and essentially shared by all of those involved in the process of organ donation and transplantation.

Finally, it is clear that without the support of the general public and their willingness to donate there would be no organs for transplants. It should be clear, however, that the best way of influencing public opinion is the media. Periodic meetings of journalist, experts in communications, and opinion leaders in transplantation are a pragmatic approach to influence and educate the media in issues related to transplantation. Misconceptions must be addressed openly, at the same time emphasizing and highlighting the positive and life-saving aspects of organ donation and transplantation.

Managing adverse publicity must be combined with adequate and systematic spread (via the media to the medical and lay community) of the positive and life-enhancing aspects of organ donation and transplantation. This is a complex and demanding task. It requires special dedication and professional support.^{7,8,12} Cultivation of positive relationships with the media is a fundamental requirement for those professionals of the transplant community who have high visibility and who act as spokespersons. One should not forget, however, that the major ingredient of successful work is credibility. To spread the message of the benefits of transplantation convincingly requires unprejudiced and close cooperation of all types of health professionals, be they involved in organ donor identification, organ procurement, transplantation, or even those unrelated to these activities, because they can have a positive (or negative) influence on the attitude of the general public toward organ donation.

A general consensus of all involved in the process of organ donation and transplantation is mandatory. This involves provision of a detailed action plan tailored to local conditions in each country, with a clear definition of its objectives—to promote a positive attitude toward organ donation internationally.

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