

MODERATOR

Hello everyone. Thank you for coming today. More than 100,000 people in the United States are currently on waiting lists to receive new kidneys.

Due to the limited supply of organs for transplant, only around 17,000 kidney transplants took place in 2014.

It perhaps should not surprise us then, to learn that many Americans look for alternatives abroad.

But unlike other forms of medical "tourism," organ transplants present a unique ethical quandary.

Organs obtained in other countries may come from questionable sources, and poor regulation and oversight make for muddy waters when looking for transplant solutions.

DR. O'CONNOR

"Transplant tourism" is a serious and growing problem.

Patients are obtaining organ transplants abroad to avoid waiting lists and expenses in the United States, but it is not always possible to track the sources of these organs.

Many donors are paid to donate, and often receive very little compensation.

They may be plagued with regret and depression after they participate in the transplantation, not to mention they may potentially develop health problems of their own.

The overall implication is that the lives of poor donors in other countries are not as valuable as the lives of the American patients who are willing to travel abroad to procure the transplants they need.

DR. REYNOLDS

The ethical quagmire of black market organs is related to transplant tourism, to be sure. But there are a number of other factors to consider before denouncing the practice altogether.

For one thing, it is important that we do not let a few bad apples spoil the barrel. There are reputable transplants performed internationally under government regulations that ensure both patient safety and the ethical procurement of organs.

Also, this is an issue of international politics. If we are going to make a public statement, we will have two problems to consider.

One, we are a group comprised of medical professionals, so we are inherently biased, and the opposition will point that out.

And two, we must remain sensitive to the complex cultural dynamics of countries that may not share our ethical framework.

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How common is transplant tourism?

DR. REYNOLDS

An estimated 3500-7000 kidney transplants involve paid donors throughout the world every year. That's between 5-10% of total transplants.

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Are overseas transplants safe?

DR. O'CONNOR

A recent UCLA study of 33 patients who had received transplants overseas found that they had much worse results than patients who received transplants in this country. Paid organ donors are not screened as thoroughly as they should be, and problems like hepatitis are often overlooked. Early organ rejection is twice as common in these patients, and infections are frequent.

DR. O'CONNOR

It's our job to make a statement. Those who interpret our statements and develop policy can determine and address any issues of bias. And we can be culturally sensitive without altering our ethical compass.

Stating publically that we oppose these procedures is not the same as forcing other countries to end them. It only means that we are presenting a consensus of professional opinion in the hope of reaching an ethical industry standard on a global scale.

We are pointing out problems that need solutions. Maybe we should keep in mind the words of Rudolph Virchow: "Medicine as a social science, as the science of human beings, has the obligation to point out problems and to attempt their theoretical solution." The politicians must find the practical solutions.

DR. REYNOLDS

I am not arguing what our role is to be, Michael. I am merely pointing out the complexities of an ethics issue that permeates a variety of cultures. If there are ethical outlets for international transplants, we shouldn't take away those options from patients whose lives are at stake just because we can't adequately address black-market organs.

We just need to identify and address those real problems. And by "we," I mean human beings in general not just the United States. An organ transplant is not, in and of itself, unethical. Our focus should be on regulation rather than prohibition. Anytime we remove an option, we limit patient freedom and potentially limit medical progress.

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What do we know about the issues facing the paid organ donors? Are they well paid and taken care of?

DR. O'CONNOR

It varies widely, of course, but poor people who sell a kidney, sometimes do so for as little as \$800 according to the World Health Organization. They will face future health problems including the worsening of their own kidney functions-provided, of course, that their surgery goes well, which is never guaranteed.

Donors in America can have kidneys removed with very small incisions. But Third World donors, can end up with wounds up to 14 inches long. These wounds take months to heal, making the patients unable to do the manual labor that most of them depend on.

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Thank you.