

Transplants in Portugal back to the level of five years ago as a result of the crisis

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Cuts The European Commission is concerned about the drop. The country was among the best and has fallen back to 2007 levels. Reduction in transplants in Ireland and Greece. Lack of resources and instability of teams are among the causes.

The financial difficulties in Europe have led to a reduction in the number of transplants, say international experts. Portugal and Greece are cited as examples of the impact of the crisis, albeit the Greeks had previously carried out very few such operations whereas Portugal was one of the top five countries in terms of organ donations per head of population. The European Commission is concerned about the situation and has asked the countries to carry out studies. The government [of Portugal] has issued an initial diagnosis. Among the causes that it highlights are: insufficient staff, instability of teams, a reduction in the cost of overtime and a reduction in the number of beds.

At a meeting organised by the European Commission in Madrid, experts warned that the reduction in health expenditure and the cuts to staff and resources in hospitals have led to a step backwards in the area of transplants. The Spanish system has the highest number of donors but there was a collapse in 2010, leading to the implementation of urgent measures (see interview).

The decrease in the collection of organs from dead donors is a Europe-wide problem but it is especially apparent in the bailed-out countries. Portugal's high point of such collections was in 2009, when the rate was 31 donations per 1 million inhabitants, but in 2011 this had dropped to the 2007 level of 23.9. Collections and transplants fell by 19% between 2011 and 2012 and in the first five months of this year they fell further, with 8% fewer transplants and 6% fewer organs.

In Ireland, the number of organs fell from 93 to 78 last year, down to 17.3 donations per 1 million inhabitants. The drop is cause for concern in Greece, too, where the figures have fluctuated: 3.9 donors per 1 million inhabitants in 2010, which rose to 6.9 in 2011, only to fall again. There are no definitive data for 2012 but Athanasis Hatiz, director of the [Greek] National Transplant Organisation, made an appeal to the public to raise money to cope with government cuts. Hatiz stated that the main reason for the fall in transplants was fewer beds in intensive care.

Experts fear that the reduction in donations may be a catalyst for human-organ trafficking. José Ramón Nuñez of the World Health Organisation estimates that 11 000 transplants take place around the world using organs from the black market and that 'citizens of the world's poorest countries such as Pakistan, Costa Rica and Peru are being exploited to the benefit of the wealthy citizens of Israel, the USA, China and India.'

Shortfall in training and resources

In 2009 Portugal's rate was close to Spain's 35.3 organs per 1 million inhabitants. Hélder Trindade, chairman of the Portuguese Institute of Blood and Transplants is under no illusions as to the detrimental impact of the cuts in reducing the number of transplants performed. He refers to a report issued by a working group set up in December to 'assess

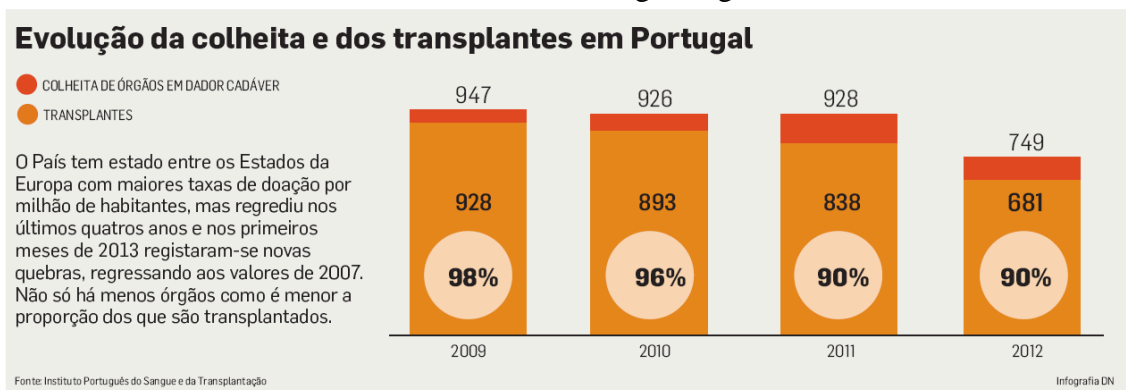
the steep fall in donations and transplants.' The reduction was so steep that there is almost no interaction with Spain on this matter, unless there is no recipient in Portugal.

The group made its assessment with 'particular focus on the last four years, as the detrimental impact has been especially acute in the last two years,' says the group. It lists four major causes: lack of specific training, insufficient staff, reduction in the number of 'active' beds and a lack of permanent resources for diagnosing brain death.

The reduction in road accidents, which is the main source of donations, is reflected in the number of transplants. Yet the annual reduction in the number of fatalities is smaller than the reduction in the number of transplants. Another indicator of shortcomings in the procedures is the proportion of transplants performed in relation to organs donated, which has fallen from 98% in 2009 to 90% in the last two years.

This is an area in which public solidarity is needed, but awareness-raising campaigns are not a priority during times of crisis, says Jacques Remacle of the European Commission's Executive Agency for Health and Consumers. 'The priority,' he says, 'is to treat rather than prevent, which overlooks the astronomical cost of, for example, a patient who needs dialysis, whereas a kidney transplant costs EUR 10 to 15 million.'

In Portugal, as in most EU countries, citizens are automatically organ donors when they die unless they have stated otherwise, though in the case of minors it is the family who decides. Furthermore, there is a trend towards using living donors.



[Text in graphic:

Trends in collection and transplants in Portugal

- COLLECTION OF ORGANS IN DONOR CORPSES
- TRANSPLANTS

Portugal has been among the countries with the highest rates of donations per 1 million inhabitants, but has gone backwards in the last four years and in the first months of 2013 the figures have fallen still further to 2007 values. There are not only fewer organs but the proportion of those transplanted is also lower.

Source: Portuguese Institute of Blood and Transplants
Infografia DN]

[Picture: Rafaella, who has had a double lung transplant, celebrates her third birthday tomorrow.]