

Science/Medicine/Styria/Austria

Organ transplants: Ever more donors in Austria

Sub-headline: Viennese expert Ferdinand Mühlbacher: Up and down -
Transplant coordinators in ever more hospitals

Graz/Vienna (APA) – The number of registered organ donors in Austria appears to be rising again. In 2006 there were 24.3 per million inhabitants, falling to 20 in 2008, rising to 25 in 2009 and then falling again last year to 22.8 per million. This year, we'll probably reach 25 per million inhabitants again", says Ferdinand Mühlbacher, Head of the University Clinic for Surgery at the Medical University of Vienna's general hospital, on the occasion of the annual conference of "Austrotransplant" in Graz (to 22 October).

"It's always fluctuating. This year it's up again, as a result of the success of local transplant coordinators in Austrian hospitals. By 2013, we want to have 25 of these coordinators in Austria", explains Mühlbacher. These specially trained doctors are responsible for the entire field of transplant medicine and try to raise their colleagues' awareness of it. After all, organ transplant rates are dependent on the notification of potential donors and their organs.

The profile of the donors – people who have been diagnosed as brain dead – has changed considerably over the past twenty years. "The old idea that it's mostly boy racers off for a spin on the motorcycle has never really been true, but today things are very different. In the past, around 60 percent of donors were patients with brain trauma, about half of them from road traffic accidents. Today, some 60 percent of donors have suffered a spontaneous cerebral haemorrhage, whilst some 30 percent are road accident victims," says Mühlbacher. He takes the view that it is particularly important to raise doctors' awareness on intensive care wards, where most brain deaths occur, so that, when the situation arises, they think about organ donation.

The way that recipients of kidneys (the most commonly transplanted organ) are treated, in order to prevent the organ being rejected, could be about to change. Belatacept is a new biotech medicine, recently licensed in Europe, on whose clinical development Mühlbacher and other researchers at the Vienna Medical University, such as the immunologist Thomas Wekerle, have collaborated. It is a fusion protein. Mühlbacher: "The treatment after a kidney transplant is usually cortisone, in decreasing doses, mycophenolic acid, an Interleukin-2 blocker and Cyclosporin A or Tacrolimus. Instead of Cyclosporin and Tacrolimus, Belatacept can now be administered monthly by infusion."

Comparison studies have shown that the new substance has no toxic effect on the donated kidney. "The 'half life' of a donor kidney can thus be increased from around 10 years now to 12.5 years. But that's a very conservative estimate. It is probably much more. I estimate 15 to 17 years." At the University Clinic for Surgery in Vienna, long-term experience of more than ten years has already been collected through participation in clinical studies: "Of 14 patients treated properly with Belatacept, 9 still have excellent kidney function", says Mühlbacher. That is many more than would otherwise be expected. Discussions are currently under way with the sickness insurance funds about how to finance such treatment long-term.

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