

EU objective: to raise European organ donation rates to the same level as Spain

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In a conference held in Brussels, Antti Maunu of the European Commission's Directorate General for Health and Consumers (DG SANCO), pointed out that the efforts of this institution are centred on reducing the number of patients dying due to a lack of donated organs, which in 2009 stood at 5 500.

Brussels, 13 to 15 November 2010. DG SANCO is aiming to raise organ donation rates and increase the number of organ transplantations performed in Europe. To do this, they have selected the Spanish model, as well as other successful models from countries such as Portugal, Belgium and Sweden. In a conference held in Brussels, Antti Maunu of DG SANCO pointed out that the efforts of this institution are centred on reducing the number of patients dying due to a lack of donated organs, which in 2009 stood at 5 500.

One of the strategies undertaken in this regard - as a result of the Spanish presidency of the EU - is the new European legislation on the standards of quality and safety of organs. The package, which was adopted on 7 July 2010, is accompanied by an Action Plan to raise awareness and increase organ availability. The aim is for other European countries to attain the same organ donation rates as Spain, where the rate is 34.3 per million population, while in Sweden it is 13.8 and in Romania, just 1.5. This will be subject to a review process in 2012 and a final evaluation in 2015.

'Our aim is to improve quality, make transplant systems more efficient and accessible and increase organ availability' said Maunu, adding that EU authority in this area does not extend to ethical aspects, responsibility of the Member States or consent to donate organs. Furthermore, organ trafficking and the activities related to the illegal trading thereof are the responsibility of organisations such as Europol and the Council of Europe. The scope of the Directive does not apply to blood and blood components, as these are covered by another directive.

According to the speaker, the legislative process that has just been launched is aimed at, above all, boosting citizens' confidence in the European transplant systems, by covering all stages of the process: from organ procurement to transport and transplantation, in order to maintain a 'high level of health protection', stressing the fact that donation is unpaid and voluntary and that all organs donated are traceable.

The most prominent actions taken include improving coordination, implementing programmes to improve quality and encourage donations from living donors, strengthening the communication skills of health professionals, informing citizens of their rights, improving organisational models throughout the EU, arranging exchanges of organs between countries, assessing post-transplantation results and establishing a common accreditation system for all Member States. 'Cooperation between the different countries is vital, and that must start here to ensure that all European citizens have the same opportunity to receive a transplant'.

Advantages of cooperation

During his speech, Dr Axel Rahmel, Medical Director of Eurotransplant, listed the requirements necessary for a fair distribution system: objectivity, reliability, transparency and the validity of the reliability criteria. In his opinion, the current trend is to have a common waiting list with harmonised reliability standards 'which benefits cooperation because it ensures that no organs are lost, improves the clinical outcome of the transplantation and means that scientific advances are shared'.

The model's biggest limitation is the lack of donors, which is why Rahmel feels that donation rates must be improved with the help of organisations in the countries with the most successful models, such as Spain, Portugal and Belgium. 'Transparency and ethics are necessary factors'.

Family is crucial

Luc Colenbie, a transplant coordinator from Belgium, emphasised the crucial role that the family plays in the process as a whole, and the need for relatives to understand the difference between a deep coma and brain death. In Belgium, the donor's family receives support after donation in the form of a letter explaining which organs have been donated, thanking them for their support and offering condolences. They are also sent thank you letters from the recipients and yearly Christmas cards. 'We are aiming to create a positive organ donation and transplant culture'.

During the conference that followed the presentations, Anna Pavlou of DG SANCO dismissed the idea of creating one European transplant coordination body. 'This makes sense, especially in countries where the system works well. We feel that the Directive represents a first step for those countries where this is not the case, and we will achieve the level of harmonisation necessary to instil confidence among citizens. Furthermore, the Action Plan will strengthen cooperation and coordination, particularly in terms of paediatric transplantation. Our aim is for all countries to achieve the same donation rates as Spain and to encourage donations from living donors'.