

Spain creates the first transplant alliance with France and Italy

They will defend a common position after coming under threat from a German bone marrow bank

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Spain has joined with France and Italy to set up a kind of ‘joint venture’ for organ, tissue and umbilical cord cell transplants to compete with Germany and other northern European countries. By signing this strategic agreement, called the Southern Alliance, the three Mediterranean countries will account for almost half (48%) of all European donors.

According to the Memorandum of Understanding signed in Rome on 1 October 2012, to which *El Mundo* was given access, ‘the aim is to establish formal cooperation between the agencies of southern and western Europe’. ‘Italy, Spain and France’, the document also states, ‘share a common vision regarding emerging bioethical issues and have systems regulated at national level using similar organisational models’.

There are similarities between the three countries’ organisational structures, which are public and centralised, contrasting with the private and decentralised systems of countries in northern Europe.

The differences between the models are causing some tension at Community level according to our sources. This has led to the need to form a united front in the south against alliances such as Eurotransplant, which distributes organs in seven States (Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Germany, Austria, Slovenia and Croatia) and is expanding to the east, and Scandiatransplant, which operates in Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Iceland.

The three countries account for half of all European donors

Spain has been the world leader in organ donations for years but the stability of the Spanish system came under threat at the beginning of the year when one of the private German bone marrow banks, DKMS, attempted to make inroads into Spain and set up here without prior permission, taking advantage of the existing legal loopholes.

The Spanish health authorities have said that the company had ‘attacked the buoyancy of the entire national transplant system’, which is ‘free of charge’ and based on ‘solidarity’ and that they are working on regulating this case by law as quickly as possible.

In order to avoid cases such as this, the three countries have decided to join forces and adopt a common position towards international bodies, i.e., to lobby in the EU. The agreement, which was given the go-ahead by the Autonomous Communities in the Interterritorial Health Council, also covers professional training, the exchange of organs in emergencies and the creation of a common agenda on bone marrow donation.

For the time being, the first practical result of the Southern Alliance is the creation of a joint database for 'crossover' kidney transplants. This way of proceeding is relatively new in Spain. It started in 2009 and 21 operations have been performed. At the meetings in Brussels organised by the European Commission, Rafael Matesanz, Director of the Spanish National Transplant Organisation (ONT), stated yesterday that 'it's working really well but the aim is to develop it further'.

The signatory countries are not ruling out the possibility of Portugal, Greece and Malta joining them in the future. The agreement lays down a two-year rotating presidency in the Alliance. Italy currently holds the presidency. Alessandro Nanni Costa, Director of the Italian National Transplant Centre, told El Mundo that the donor numbers for which the Southern Alliance is responsible 'are important not only for our countries but for all of Europe'.

Karim Laouabdia-Sellami of the French Biomedicine Agency said, 'we are facing many of the same problems and changes regarding donations and instead of tackling them alone we have decided to join forces to rise to these challenges'.

Latinos leading in transplants

(PMP): Per million population	EU (PMP)	Southern Alliance (*) (PMP)	% Variation (EU / Southern Alliance)
Population (million people)	504.2	173.1	34.3%
ORGANS			
Deceased organ donors	9 604 (19.0)	4 622 (26.7)	48.1%
Kidney transplants	18 712 (37.1)	7 225 (41.7)	38.6%
Kidney transplant from living donor	3 857 (7.6)	825 (4.8)	21.4%
Liver transplants	7 006 (13.9)	3 335 (19.3)	47.6%
Liver transplant from living donor	243 (0.5)	57 (0.3)	23.5%
Heart transplants	1 980 (3.9)	925 (5.3)	46.7%
Lung transplants	1 677 (3.3)	674 (3.9)	40.2%
Pancreas transplants	859 (1.7)	242 (1.4)	28.2%
Intestinal transplants	56 (0.1)	23 (0.1)	41.1%
UMBILICAL CORD CELLS			
Nr of umbilical cords collected (not from family)	57 676	33 122	57.4%
Nr of transplants performed	8 305	4 456	53.7%
TISSUES			
Corneal transplants	14 009	12 034	85.9%

(*): Southern Alliance is a group made up of France, Italy and Spain

SOURCE: National Transplant Organisation (ONT)

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