

Positive media coverage works wonders

KRYSTYNA KNYPL, <http://gazeta-dla-lekarzy.com>

There is a saying in media circles that good news is no news. If that is true, then Poland must be a fantastic place to work as a journalist given the number of sensational news stories about our healthcare system.

In early November 2013, transplant medicine in Poland once again took on the role of media villain of the day. Such events are not only a local speciality. Transplantation takes place on the border between life and death, and this alone explains why it is in the media spotlight. If we add to the mix a journalist, patient or doctor hungry for fame and sensation, we have the recipe in any country for a fall in the number of organs being transplanted.

After any media storm a great deal of time must pass before there is an improvement in the situation with organ donations and transplants. In 1980, after a single short programme broadcast by UK television at a prime viewing time, there was a fall in the number of organs donated that lasted fully 15 months.

Scandal-mongering press articles on transplants can be read by citizens of the United Kingdom, Portugal, Spain, France and other countries. The classic themes of such sensationalist reporting are alleged fiddling with organ waiting lists and the creation of doubts around the issue of brain death.

The geography of transplants

An examination of a map of Europe showing organ donations reveals major disparities. Individual countries can be compared using the figure for how often organs are donated per million population (pmp). Spain has the best figures for organ donation, with 35.3 pmp. Croatia and Portugal also perform well, with 33.6 pmp and 28.1 pmp respectively.

How do things stand with organ donation and transplantation in Poland? In 2011 we had 615 deceased donors, from whom 786 organs were taken. In addition, 51 kidneys and 14 liver fragments were transplanted from live donors. Dividing these figures by the population gives our country an organ donation frequency figure of 14.1 pmp. And while 2012 saw 1 610 organs being transplanted, the National Transplant Waiting List still numbers around 1 500 people! The need is thus enormous and it is vital to find ways of improving the situation.

Good communication

Spain worked long and hard at its success. Dr Rafael Matesanz, director of the *Organisation National de Transplantés*, is considered to be the godfather of the Spanish transplantation success story. His lecture at the 'Fourth Journalists' Workshop – Organ donation and transplantation'

(http://ec.europa.eu/health/blood_tissues_organ/events/journalist_workshops_organ_en.htm) allowed participating journalists to become acquainted with a great deal of interesting information on how Spain has achieved these fantastic results in organ donation and transplantation.

It is necessary to be aware that there is no one single model for increasing the number of organ donors. Funding and the transplant sector's organisational model are obviously very significant. A very important role is played by coordinators and their skills at communicating not only with donors' families but also with the media are vital. These very important skills are also very difficult and far from universal, stressed Dr Matesanz in his presentation.

This is another reason why it is vital for people working on organ transplants to have qualifications in this area and for there to be transparency in the procedures allowing people to qualify as donors, including periodic audits on the issue of people being declared brain dead. It is even very important to consider who the press officer at a transplant centre is and what skills and competencies he or she has in communicating with the media.

For many years Spain has been conducting an ongoing information campaign in the media on the issue of transplants. Such activity raises public awareness and translates in real terms into correct attitudes towards this branch of medicine. In the first three months of 2013 alone, the Spanish media featured 927 information items thematically linked to transplantation, namely 170 television programmes, 216 radio programmes and 527 press articles.

During the symposium, Dr Matesanz stressed that, although medical literature has not documented the influence of public campaigns on increasing the number of organ donations, this has undoubtedly been the case. The numbers of organ donors in Spain say more on this issue than any scientific publication could.

Press campaigns that do not fall within the category of advertising still cost money. The budget for the media campaigns in Spain is supported by various business sectors; indeed, they provide the greatest contribution, with 4.02% of the funds coming from the telecommunications operator Telefonica, 3.55% from the department store El Corte Inglés, 3.25% from Procter & Gamble and only 0.001% from the Spanish Ministry of Health.

The media can be very helpful!

Looking at the buffeting taken by the transplant sector in media storms, a question comes to mind: what can be done to prevent the next unnecessary, unfounded bout of sensation seeking and bring about an increase in the number of organs being offered? In today's world ruled by mediocrity, it is not enough to be right; you also need to know how get your position across.

Awareness of the enormous role of journalists and the ability to develop good contacts with the media are necessary for everyone, including doctors. Among us doctors, media relations are a much debated issue. Usually we demonstrate a passive, critical and emotional attitude. This is not the right approach and does not bring the desired effects, so changes are needed. We need to master the art of effective contact with the media. At the outset we need to remember three practical tips:

1. Don't avoid the media! They can be an ally to a doctor working in transplants or any other branch of medicine.
2. Be active in media relations. Don't wait until they come to you asking for a comment on an issue which is being negatively portrayed by someone whose goals differ from yours. Rebutting attacks is always difficult.

3. In the media, promote the positive aspects of organ donation and transplants as well as any other medical speciality, always bearing in mind that a good image is the result of long, patient work.

The growing role of social media

Today's media are made up not only of well-known and acknowledged titles, but also local newspapers, social networks, blogs and so on. This diversification of the media was reflected in the theme of the meeting in Brussels. An interesting topic of conversation at the 'Fourth Journalists' Workshop – Organ donation and transplantation' was the growing role of the social media in creating correct attitudes towards organ donation and transplantation. This issue was discussed by Dr Thomas Breidenbach, medical director for Bavaria Region at the *Deutsche Stiftung Organspende* in Germany.

As a medical social medium, *Gazeta dla Lekarzy* is well aware that the medical community can and should actively improve its abilities in this area and cooperate effectively with the media. Where transplants are concerned, communication is particularly important but also difficult, so with this introduction as a starting point we promise to continue featuring this issue on our pages.