

Women are more generous when it comes to donating organs for transplant

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European Day The Portuguese and European authorities want to raise awareness of living organ donation, which has gone down in Portugal

Sofia C. had no hesitation in donating a kidney to her brother and would not be swayed from her decision. 'It was entirely down to me' she said, her mind clearly made up. The risks were very low and she was delighted to 'give health' to a family member. Not that André F. her brother, had asked her to, and nor would he have dared to do so. He is eternally grateful 'for her courage and strength'. This is a gesture that is very rare in Portugal and when it happens it comes from within the family and usually from women. Today is European Day for Organ Donation and Transplantation.

'People do not put themselves forward more because they are afraid. They are ill-informed. I did a great deal of research including clinical research. Unfortunately, it is only when things happen in a family that people start to think about these matters,' explained Sofia C. in Brussels. She was born in Oporto to Italian-Portuguese parents, along with her six siblings who remained here. She is number three.

André F. a 52-year old engineer, is number two. There was no debate in the family on the matter but they suspect that it was the parents who suffered the most, emotionally speaking, on 8 July 2008, the day of the operation. André's kidney failure was detected in 1993 but the body gradually adapted and it was not until 2005 that the conclusion was drawn that having a transplant, as opposed to haemodialysis for the rest of his life, would be the right course of action. André put his name on a list, as do most patients in his situation.

He had no need to wait because Sofia is a decisive woman, who knew that there was a 98% chance of her kidney being accepted by her brother's body. Of course she underwent a number of tests, which she repeats every year, and has a daughter to bring up. But her brother has three children and without the transplant he would have had a very low life expectancy. 'I have always been well looked after in Portugal' says Sofia, 'I lead a normal life, I drink a lot of water – though everyone is recommended to do this – and my brother has a healthy life.'

The siblings had their operations at the Hospital de Santo António in Oporto, and they are full of praise for the hospital staff. Two teams look after us. André is monitored by Dr Josefina Lascass and Sofia by Leonídio Dias, head of transplants and living donation at the hospital. The hospital carries out 20 kidney transplants per year involving living donors.

It is not enough to be healthy to donate a kidney (or a liver, which happens more with children); what is needed is mental strength. Donations have to be validated by each hospital's admissibility supervisor and approved by the ethics committee. 'Our guiding principle is that donors are healthy people who deserve respect' says Leonídio Dias.

In Portugal, the number of kidney transplants from living donors is low by comparison with other countries (see inset), around 50 per year. However there was a slight increase

in 2012, in contrast with transplants from deceased donors, which went down. Leonídio Dias says that the 'solution to the reduction in the number of transplants from deceased donors must never be to increase the number of living donors.' He explains that 'this practice must remain a matter of altruism and everything must be done to prevent it from becoming commercial and from financial incentives being offered for living donation.' If we are to increase the number of deceased donors 'more effective use must be made of potential donors with brain death and programmes with donors with heart failure must be implemented'.

STATISTICS

LIVING KIDNEY DONOR

› **Portugal** had a proportion of 4.5% kidney transplants from living donors per 1 million inhabitants in 2012, one of the lowest rates in the EU, although there has been a slight increase. The highest rates are in the Netherlands (29 per 1 million) and Cyprus (27.9 per 1 million). The European average is 13.7 per 1 million.

DECEASED KIDNEY DONOR

› **The national rate** is 36.2 transplants per 1 million, which puts Portugal among the countries with the highest number of such operations last year, albeit nine points down on the year before. Croatia performs the most transplants, 50.5 per 1 million, with the European average standing at 29.7 per 1 million.

DECEASED DONORS

› **Portugal** performed 252 transplants last year from deceased donors. Spain has the highest number of such transplants (1643), in both absolute and relative terms.

[Picture 1: André has a kidney from Sofia, his youngest sister]

[Picture 2: Sofia had no hesitation]