

Latvian public unwilling to donate organs

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Not a single heart transplant has taken place in Latvia this year. Five patients could have had a heart transplant, but the relatives of the deceased (the potential donors) refused to give their consent.

People living in Latvia have the most negative attitude towards organ transplantation in the whole of the European Union. Data from a Eurobarometer survey show that just 25% of people in Latvia allow their organs to be used for transplantation when they die.

Consent to use the organs of a dead relative to save another person's life would be given by just 36% of those living in Latvia. A sizeable portion of the population said in the survey that they did not know whether they would give such consent and, if not, why not. This shows that the Latvian public has insufficient information about organ transplantation. The Eurobarometer survey also identifies the main reasons why people in Latvia would not consent to organs being used as fears about the deceased person's body being disfigured and lack of faith in the healthcare system.

Most refuse

It is rare for families in Latvia to discuss the issue of organ transplantation, should the question arise, and perhaps one can understand people's reticence to discuss questions relating to death and the loss of a loved one. However, the survey shows that in other European countries half of the inhabitants have had family discussions about organ donation or transplantation. In Latvia, only 15% of families have broached the subject. According to data held by the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, just 600 individuals, i.e. 0.015% of the population of the country, have taken a firm stance on organ donation – most have refused, one third have given their consent.

Sergejs Truškovs, director of the Latvian branch of BaltTransplant, explains that if the register does not contain data on a specific individual, his or her relatives are asked whether they would agree to an organ being donated from the dead relative. In most cases people say no, though there are cases where, having initially refused, they subsequently think about it and give their consent. It is quite understandable that people are initially in shock about the death of a loved one. Whereas once upon a time a quarter of people who had lost a relative refused to give consent, now that figure is 80%. Mr Truškovs believes this has to do with the depressed mood of individuals during a time of crisis. To which the doctors would say yes, it's hard to cope with the loss of a loved one, but it's important to understand that by consenting to the use of a dead person's organs, assuming this has not been expressly forbidden, you're saving lives.

It is, unfortunately, quite common for people to ask to be paid for the use of a dead relative's organs, though there have been fewer instances of this in recent years. This year, 58 kidney transplants were carried out in Latvia, six of these from live donors (in four cases they were relatives).

Lives can be saved

The greatest support for organ donation is in Sweden, Malta, Belgium and Finland. Charlotte Möller, from the Swedish National Council for Organ and Tissue Donation, points out that Sweden garners more support amongst the general public for organ transplantation than any other EU Member State. 83% of people living in Sweden would be prepared to donate their organs when they die, whilst 73% would consent to organs from a dead relative being used for transplant purposes.

Ms Möller believes that this has been achieved by means of targeted public education work and judicious policy-making by the government. She told Neatkarīgā that even countries facing economic hardship can make changes in terms of political responsibility (by maximising efforts to develop the transplantation sector) and in terms of raising public awareness. She mentions the example of the campaign run in Sweden entitled "Together we can save lives", which provided the public with a wealth of information on the subject. The response was overwhelming and there was a huge increase in the number of people officially registering their consent to their organs being used for transplantation in the event of their death. Knowing that kidney dialysis takes place in Latvia, Ms Möller also pointed out that the government must understand the major contribution kidney transplantation can make to public health compared with dialysis, which is more expensive.

Shortage of donors across Europe

The number of patients registering each year for transplants in the European Union has now reached 60 000. In Latvia there are just 40 persons per million inhabitants, compared with 80 in Austria, France, Belgium and Italy, explains Axel Ramel from Eurotransplant, which brings together six European Union Member States, including the Netherlands, Belgium and Austria. Latvia has the fewest number of patients on this list (alongside Cyprus, Lithuania and Romania, according to 2007 data), which causes Mr Ramel to wonder whether these countries really do have so few people needing transplants. He believes that many countries have set up a quota system – as many patients are put on the list as there is money. There are 16 000 on the waiting list for transplants in the Eurotransplant countries, 3 000 of whom last year were awaiting a kidney transplant, 1 152 a heart transplant and 972 a lung transplant. 75 patients are currently awaiting kidney transplants in Latvia, five are awaiting a heart transplant and three liver transplants (which are not currently performed in Latvia).

Spain is the country with the highest number of donors per million inhabitants - 34.4 compared with 14.8 in Latvia and 25.4 in Estonia. Latvia does not fare badly at European level, as this indicator is 10 in a number of countries. Spain represents a success story, but as Rafael Matesanz, Director of the Spanish National Transplantation Service, points out, this is the result of several years' intensive work shaping public opinion, a time spent having to combat widely held views about organ sales and people's distrust of changes in healthcare. Much time was spent explaining about transplantations, for instance how doctors make their decisions, how a person can become a donor, what constitutes brain death and many other sensitive issues.