

Journalists supporting transplantation

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<http://blog.wirtualnemedi.pl/magdalena-pokrzycka/post/dziennikarze-dla-transplantacji>

It was just another unusual day in Brussels, the capital of Europe. Just another day for the staff of the European Commission, who went to work in the morning as normal, but an unusual one for several dozen journalists interested in organ donation and transplants who had arrived there from all European Union countries as well as Norway and Switzerland. They had come to take part in special workshops attended by figures such as Tonio Borg, the EU Commissioner for Health and Consumers, Andrzej Ryś, a director at the Directorate-General for Health and Consumers, Belgian transplant doctors, people whose decision to donate an organ had saved someone's life, and others who were living normal lives thanks to transplants.

My interest in organ donation and transplants developed by chance. Around a year and a half ago, a friend of mine living in the United States fell seriously ill and urgently required a kidney transplant. A journalist from a local newspaper published my friend's story and, to my friend's surprise, within a few days several people had come forward to donate a kidney to him. Following careful testing a middle-aged woman was chosen as the donor. My friend has had his operation, feels great and will be grateful to his dying day to the person who gave him the most precious gift - literally a part of herself.

I began to take an interest in organ donation in my own surroundings in Lublin. I got into contact with the hospital that carries out transplants, but immediately encountered reluctance on the part of the local transplant coordinator there, who had had distinctly negative experiences with media contacts. Several years ago a transplant doctor from the clinic in Lublin transplanted three organs from a deceased young donor who, it later turned out, had been very ill. Unfortunately, even the most rigorous procedures do not always uncover a donor's illness. Although transplant doctors not only in Poland but in Europe as a whole work to minimise risk, each and every operation carries an element of risk. And it is precisely this risk that led to post-transplant complications in the local patients who died as a result. The legal case against the doctor lasted several years. He was cleared of all charges, but did not return to work and instead retired. The media reported on the trial every step of the way, and the negative emotions which the case aroused in Polish society led to a drop in the number of donors. This is why, with memories of the case fresh in his mind, the transplant doctor acting as transplantation coordinator in Lublin did not wish to speak to me. I convinced him that I would submit everything I wrote for approval and would not publish anything without his consent. I kept to my promise, and the article was published at the turn of the year in one of the city's newspapers. This acted as my 'pass' to participate in the European journalist workshops in Brussels.

During a single unusual day spent at the European Commission, I was able to share my experiences and also listen to those of my colleagues from other EU countries. While our experiences differed, we shared a common goal: to inform our readers in an interesting and factual manner about what transplantation is and why they should become organ donors. Rafael Matesanz, representative of the National Transplant Organisation in Spain - a country that can boast one of the highest rates of transplants in Europe - presented the best methods

for engaging with the public (which in Spain is very well informed about transplant-related issues), and primarily that of active participation by national media. This is tied in with the fact that Spain is among the leading EU nations in the number of donors and operations performed. How is information on this sensitive topic communicated in Spain? One of the most interesting methods of reaching a wider target group is a round-the-clock telephone line known as the '24-hour transplantation hotline'. Thanks to many information campaigns, this hotline is constantly being publicised in the media, and the chance to speak to transplant doctors is open to anyone, from doctors in other fields, via journalists and staff of the health care administration to any other interested resident of Spain. The information campaigns, including the 'hotline' itself, have resulted in a high number of transplants, and the media's role in this success is crucial.

One of the speakers, Prof. Jacques Pirenne from University Hospitals Leuven in Belgium, admitted that he could easily understand my problem with initial contacts with the hospital in Lublin and its transplant coordinator. In his view, the media often take an interest in transplants only when something bad happens. This works to the detriment of people awaiting transplants, who often lose the chance of a new life when the number of donors suddenly falls, for example as a result of unobjective, and thus harmful, articles or programmes. While Professor Pirenne believes that the risk associated with transplants cannot be eliminated entirely, he has no doubt that if there is a 99% chance of help and life and a 1% chance of an unsuccessful transplant, he is on the side of help and life.

Since my visit to Brussels - earlier, indeed, with publication of my article - it would not be an exaggeration to say that my contacts with the hospital in Lublin and its transplant coordinator have become friendly. After my return from the workshops I called him to share my impressions and information. He is currently preparing his own paper for a medical conference on the issue of transplants, ethical problems and contacts with the media. My Brussels experiences will certainly be of assistance in collecting information on how journalists can and should provide support in this area, which is so sensitive but also so important to society. For my part, I will keep writing about transplants and talking to the people I meet in the course of my journalism. Speaking of which... On the plane to Brussels I met a woman travelling to Antwerp for work. She travels once a month between Świdnik, near Lublin, and Antwerp. We chatted about the reasons for our journeys to Brussels. I was travelling to the workshops for journalists writing about transplants and she to work. My travelling companion found the reason for my visit to Brussels very interesting. It turned out that she carries with her a declaration consenting to her organs being used for transplants in the event of her death. She told me about how her family had reacted - with disbelief and incomprehension - and described her motivation. 'If by doing this I can save someone's life, then I'm all for it,' she said. She is meant to call me when she returns from Antwerp in a month. We'll arrange to meet for a chat, because what she is doing is the exception rather than the rule and deserves to be written about and emulated. Indeed, it is through good examples - people who have had transplants and those who wish to be donors - that the general public can be motivated to get involved and give their consent to sharing the greatest gift of all, the gift of love and of life itself.