The Ethics of Paid Organ Donations

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In the past several years, there has been a dramatic increase in the demand for organs while the organ supply has increased slowly. The resulting organ shortages have led some to consider monetary incentives for organ donation. The once completely taboo idea of paid organ donation is now being pondered in many different corners of the globe.

The National Transplantation Act of 1984 made the selling of organs illegal in the United States. The United Nations and the vast majority of countries around the world also ban organ donation. However, even where the practice is illegal, a black market for organs has developed, particularly the selling of kidneys in India. Concern over these practices has led some to call for the legalization and regulation of the organ trade.

There are several benefits and drawbacks to paid organ donations. The most obvious benefit is the expected increase in the supply of organs available for transplantation. People who would otherwise die while waiting for an organ donor would be given a second chance at life. Additionally, those who give up what is clearly a precious commodity would receive some monetary compensation. Technology and techniques have advanced in recent years, making transplantation procedures safer and more successful.

Despite these projected benefits, there are a slew of ethical concerns about compensation for organs. The major concerns are the exploitation of the poor, healthy people facing the risks of surgery, and putting a price on human life. It is expected that poor people would disproportionately sell their organs while only the wealthy would be able to afford to buy them. Also, organ transplantation is a major procedure which carries an inherent level of risk for both parties involved. Additionally, there is a strong feeling that organ donation should remain altruistic in nature and the buying and selling of organs will devalue human dignity. Based on these arguments, we conclude that paid organ donation should remain illegal.

In light of these concerns it has been suggested that the families of deceased organ donors receive some compensation. This compensation may go towards the cost of their loved one’s funeral. Although there are several details to be worked out, namely the amount of compensation and who will receive it, as well as a major concern that doctors may be too anxious in removing potential donors from life support, we find this idea to be ethically acceptable. Additionally, we support a renewed campaign to inform people about the demand for organs and other steps to encourage donation.

In the near future there may be other alternatives to the standard organ transplantations. Advances in xenotransplantation, stem cell research, and the development of artificial organs may one day solve the organ shortage. Although each of these alternatives carries their own unique set of ethical implications, we feel that increased funding must be spent on these avenues of research.
References


