A.M.A. Debates Plan for Organ Donors

SAN FRANCISCO, Dec. 2 (AP) — As the nation's need for organ transplants continues to outstrip the supply, the American Medical Association grappled today with a possible solution once thought taboo: paying dying people and their families for vital organs.

Such financial incentives were banned by Congress in 1984, and as a result people needing organ transplants must rely strictly on volunteers. Only 25 percent of the 78,000 organ transplants needed, however, will occur in time to save a life, according to the United Network for Organ Sharing, the nonprofit agency that the government pays to oversee the nation's organ donor network.

Fifteen people die each day awaiting an organ transplant, the agency says. Most donation decisions must be made by families of people who die unexpectedly, and most families in those situations decline to donate their relatives' organs.

"We have a nationwide crisis, and altruism doesn't seem to be hacking it right now," said Dr. Frank Riddick Jr., chairman of the A.M.A.'s council on ethical and judicial affairs. Dr. Riddick's council was urging the association to study what effect financial incentives would have on organ donations.

The council debated the issue today and was to make its recommendation to the full medical association on Monday. The association will decide this week if it will adopt the recommendation.

If the association agrees to test financial incentives, Congress would have to change the law to permit a study.

One such program, passed by the Pennsylvania Legislature in 1999, would have the state pay $300 toward the funeral of every donor. It has never been carried out because of the federal ban.

When Congress enacted the ban, most people in the organ donor field found financial incentives unethical. Many in the field still find financial incentives distasteful.

"Most donor families we talked to are quite offended at the thought that financial incentives would have made a difference," said Phyllis Weber, executive director of the California Transplant Donor Network, which collects about 700 organs a year in Northern California.

"In fact, financial incentives could backfire," Ms. Weber said.

The United Network, too, remains skeptical of financial incentives.

"There's a thought that to offer financial incentives will open up a Pandora's box," said Joel Newman, a spokesman for the agency.

A bill introduced in Congress in May, the Gift of Life Tax Credit Act, would allow a family a $10,000 tax credit in exchange for donated organs.

In the meantime, blood and reproductive material can legally be sold. "There seems to be no compelling reason why viable solid organs should be treated differently from less complex tissues on moral grounds," the council's report says.

"Moreover, donation itself implies a property right in organs."


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