

The Royal College of Surgeons policy position regarding organ donation

Organ transplantation remains one of the most important advances in modern medicine, enabling the treatment of patients who have failed, damaged or missing organs. Advances in both transplant surgery and immunosuppression mean we are now able to successfully transplant heart, kidneys, liver, lungs and pancreas and intestine enabling patients to greatly improve their health and quality of life.

The gap between the number of organs available for transplant and those waiting for transplants continues to grow in the United Kingdom with over 500 patients dying every year waiting for a potentially lifesaving transplant. In 2011/12 the organ donation rate for the UK stood at 17.4 organ donations per million of population which has shown a substantial improvement compared to recent years but is still lower than many other European countries. Evidence from these countries demonstrates that investment in public awareness campaigns and infrastructure that supports transplantation services, such as the availability of intensive care beds and number of specialist nurses in organ donation, can substantially increase organ donation. It is therefore of profound importance that investment in these areas is increased to support organ donation.

The current "opt-in" system of consent for organ donation, where individuals are asked to register their willingness to be a donor after their death, continues to be debated. Many opponents of the current system favour a system of "presumed consent", where it is assumed that an individual wishes to be a donor unless he or she has "opted out" by registering their objection to donation after their death.

The Royal College of Surgeons and our Patient Liaison Group takes a neutral position on the system of organ donation as we believe there is insufficient evidence that an opt-in or opt-out system increases rates of organ donation. We consider the issue to be a matter for personal ethical and philosophical deliberation. We believe that to improve organ donation rates it is vital that investment in public awareness campaigns and infrastructure that supports transplantation services is increased.

February 2013