

## Why should we regulate the organ trade?

The Medical Post

Collin Leslie

November 22, 2011

Print

Feature

Link: N/A

### EDITORIAL

# Should we regulate the organ trade?

What is happening in the international illegal organ trade today is monstrous. Airing on TVO in Ontario (Dec. 7 at 9 p.m. EST) and on the Knowledge Network in British Columbia (Dec. 13 at 9 p.m. PST) is a new documentary, *The Market*. It follows the tales of two families: a daughter, a mother (whose kidneys are failing and who has been waiting for a new kidney for over five years) and a grandmother in Nanaimo, B.C., and two sisters in Chennai, India (one is an illegal organ broker; the other wants to sell one of her kidneys for \$2,500 to pay off debts).



Colin Leslie  
Editor

In India, selling organs is illegal but flourishes via a black market involving bribes all the way from brokers in the slums to health-care workers in the hospitals. The documentary shows everything one expects: Westerners pay \$60,000 but the kidney sellers get a small fraction of that; the organ traffickers cheat the sellers after the renal transplant and give them half, or less, of the pittance they were promised.

The situation isn't much better for those who go overseas to get a harvested human organ on the black market. Many receive less than optimal medical care and end up with antibiotic-resistant infections, tuberculosis and organ failure.

So, it's a horror show.

One reaction to this is to go all "Dutch practical" and take a view that looks at things this way: "Look, we're not going to get rid of prostitution or drugs, so let us decriminalize them and we can then provide some harm reduction strategies."

In principle, the same applies here. As long as there is an organ shortage, desperate rich folk in Western nations and desperately poor folk in developing nations, there is going to be organ selling whether we like it or not.

The goal of international regulation of the organ trade would be to get organized crime out of it, get fair prices and safer practices for donors and safer medical care for recipients.

About 5,000 people sell organs on the black

market each year, Dr. Francis Delmonico, a surgery professor at Harvard and an adviser on transplants to the World Health Organization, recently told *Bloomberg News*.

"There have been successes fighting organ trafficking around the world," said Dr. Delmonico, president-elect of the Montreal-based Transplantation Society, which lobbies governments to crack down on illicit procedures. "But organ trafficking continues to flourish because (criminal gangs) exploit shortages of organ donors."

In 2008, more than 150 transplant specialists from nearly 80 countries including Canada, the U.K., the U.S., France, India and China signed the Istanbul Declaration on Organ Trafficking and Transplant Tourism, calling for a total ban on organ trafficking and transplant tourism. Last year, the Canadian Society of Transplantation and Canadian Society of Nephrology issued a joint policy statement endorsing the Istanbul Declaration.

Right now, Iran is the only nation in the world where buying and selling organs is legal.

Anyone who spent possibly too much of their formative years reading science fiction knows how macabre "organlegging" can become: We slide down a slippery slope and the poor become little more than organ farms so the rich can have longer lives.

But the idea that decriminalizing and regulating kidney sales will lead to the buying and selling of eyeballs, hearts and young skin is questionable. There are many things that could become slippery slopes, yet we as rational agents have designed systems so they don't.

Many of us find the sale of human body parts gruesome. However, is that feeling of revulsion an important thing—a deeply embedded part of our brains telling us that we must have respect for the integrity of our fellow man's body, for, when we don't, wicked danger lurks? Or does the revulsion we feel simply come from growing up with the mores of the time and place in which we were raised?

The idea of selling human body parts strikes us all as ghoulish. But is leaving it in the hands of organized crime—and not being able to wipe it out—more ghoulish?—*Colin Leslie, editor*