

Definition: What are Organ Transplants?

An **organ transplant** is a surgical operation in which a failing or damaged organ in the human body is removed and replaced with a functioning one. The donated organ may be from a deceased donor, a living donor, or an animal. In some cases an artificial organ is used.

**Cadaveric organ donation** involves removing organs from a recently deceased donor.

**Living organ donation** involves the donation of one of a paired organ (such as kidneys) or a portion of an organ (such as a lobe of the liver or lung). The donor's organ system is still able to function after the donation. Living donors are often related to the patient, but that is not always the case.



## Ethical Issues

The major ethical concerns regarding organ transplant stem from the issue of a shortage of organs. The number of patients on the waiting list for organ donation far exceeds the number of available donors. As of January 2008, over 97,900 people remained on a waiting list, and between January and September of 2007 only 21,403 transplant surgeries had been performed.

The shortage of organs available for transplant gives rise to moral and ethical issues surrounding the procurement and distribution organs:

- Should those who have a better chance for survival be given priority over other patients needing organ transplants?
- Should parents of young children be given priority?
- Should those whose lifestyle choices (smoking, drinking, drug use, obesity, etc.) damaged their organ(s) be given the opportunity of an organ transplant?
- Should incentives, either monetary or non-monetary, be offered in order to encourage organ donation? Should those who made the decision to donate organs of a loved one who has been declared dead receive any kind of financial compensation?
- Does “transplant tourism” – the concept of traveling to developing countries to obtain organs exploit the poor and what does this mean for distributive justice?
- Should prisoners on death row be given the option of donating organs upon their death, or even be offered the option of trading a kidney or bone marrow in exchange for a life sentence in prison without parole?
- Should everyone be required to indicate their wishes regarding organ transplantation on either their income tax forms or drivers license?

- Should consent to donate organs be presumed, so that organs are donated unless a person, while still living, specifically requests not to donate upon death?
- Should organs be created through the use of stem cells?
- Should hospital policies permit organs to be taken from non- heart-beating donors (NHBD) to increase the number of organs available?

## Links

Dr. Jeffrey Kahn, Director of the University of Minnesota 's Center for Bioethics, discussed ethical issues surrounding organ transplants on Minnesota Public Radio's *Midmorning* program on March 6, 2006. Topics included advertising for organ donations, the ability of living donors to choose organ recipients, and the recent face transplant in France. The recorded audio can be accessed online at <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2006/03/06/midmorning2/>.

The United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS), on the Internet at [www.unos.org](http://www.unos.org), is a nonprofit, scientific and education organization focused on organ transplantation. UNOS administers the nation's only Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network (OPTN), which was established by the U.S. Congress in 1984. The OPTN, online at [www.optn.org](http://www.optn.org), facilitates organ matching and placement and collects transplant data.

Also at the United Network for Organ Sharing website is page that discusses bioethical issues surrounding organ transplant, <http://www.optn.org/resources/bioethics.asp>.

TransWeb.org features recipient and donor stories on their website, available at [www.TransWEb.org](http://www.TransWEb.org).

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Web site for Organ Donation is available online at [www.organdonor.gov](http://www.organdonor.gov).

The topic of Transplant Tourism is addressed when a man travels overseas in search of a kidney donor. An article about this documentary is available online at <http://pt.wkhealth.com/pt/re/ajtr/abstract>.



## Suggested Reading

### Online

[Search for Transplant Organs Becomes a Web Free-for-All](#) Stein, Rob. Washington Post September 23, 2005.

[The Consequences of Public Policy to Buy and Sell Organs for Transplantation](#)

Kahn J. and Delmonico F. *American Journal of Transplantation* 4(2):178. February 2004. (Registration required for access)

The Ethics of Organ Transplantation, available online from the University of Minnesota's Center for Bioethics at [www.bioethics.umn.edu/publications/organ.pdf](http://www.bioethics.umn.edu/publications/organ.pdf)

[Transplants: Is the system fair?](#) Shelton, Deborah. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* . August 24, 2005.

**Books**

The Ethics of Organ Transplants: The Current Debate.  
Arthur Caplan; Prometheus Books (1999).

**Articles**

Banasik M. Living donor transplantation--the real gift of life. Procurement and the ethical assessment. [Journal Article] *Annals of Transplantation*. 11(1):4-6, 2006.

Caring for organ donors: the intensive care unit physicians' view. Sadala ML, Lorencon M, Cercal M, Schelp A. *Heart & Lung* 35 (3) 2006: 190-197.

Commercial living non-related organ transplantation: a viewpoint from a developed country. Hoyer, Peter F. *Pediatric Nephrology*, 2006: 21: 1364-1368.  
Available online at <http://www.springerlink.com/content/095362r104572744/fulltext.pdf>.

Ethical challenges in live organ donation. Bramstedt KA, Florman S, Miller CM. *Current Opinion in Organ Transplantation* 10 (4) 2005: 340-344.

Incentives for providing organs.  
McCarrick PM. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 13(1) 2003 March.

Legal and ethical issues related to non heart beating organ donation.  
McKenney E. Parker B. *AORN Journal*, 2003: 77: 973.

Public policy and the sale of human organs.  
Cohen CB. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics* 12(1) 2002 March.

Putting patients first in organ allocation: An ethical analysis of the U.S. debate.  
Childress JF. *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 10(4):365-376, 2001 Fall.

Should everyone have equal access to organ transplantation: an argument in favor.  
Douglas DD. *Archives of Internal Medicine* Vol. 163; Sept. 8, 2003.  
Available online at [archinte.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/full/163/16/1883](http://archinte.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/full/163/16/1883).

The roles of a bioethicist on an organ transplantation service. Wright L, Ross K, Daar AS. *American Journal of Transplantation* 5 (4) 2005: 821-826.

Three views of organ procurement policy: moving ahead or giving up?  
Kahn JP. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics* 13(1) 2003 March.



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## Facts & Statistics

- On average 17 patients die every day while awaiting an organ.
- On average 110 people are added to the nation's organ transplant waiting list each day- one every 13 minutes.
- As of January 2008, 97,960 people remained on the waiting list for an organ transplant.
- Advertisements for potential donors posted by loved ones can now be found on the Internet, according to an Associated Press article (Oct. 2004) available online at [www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6326205/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6326205/).
- It is illegal to buy or sell organs in the U.S.