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Organ Transplants

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Item Type	Article
Authors	Pollnitz
Publisher	The Lutheran
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Download date	2026-11-06 13:23:49
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/217641

CSBQ Discussion paper

Approved for website, May 2002

(Dr Pollnitz wrote this article for "The Lutheran", July 2000)

ORGAN TRANSPLANTS

Nine years ago I ran a workshop on organ transplantation at a Lutherans For Life conference. I recall being asked : "Is this Christian? Is it Lutheran? Is it morally right?" In my opinion the short answer to all three questions is Yes. Perhaps one might claim a scriptural precedent, given that our Lord performed the first-ever human tissue transplant when he removed a rib from Adam in order to create Eve (Genesis 2:22).

Organ transplantation is one of the major medical success stories of the last fifty years. In Australia thousands of people who would otherwise have died of organ failure are alive and able because they have received an organ transplant. While recent good publicity has increased the number of Australians donating organs when they die, the demand for organs continues to exceed the supply. Needy people like David Hoffman can wait years for a donor organ to become available. Children with organ failure need transplants too, and some of those waiting for a heart or liver transplant will die before a donor organ becomes available.

You may have seen the bumper sticker: "Don't Take Your Kidneys To Heaven. Heaven Knows We Need Them Here!" This makes good sense to me. When we die this earthly body returns to the dust, and at the resurrection we are promised a glorious new body (Philippians 3:20). At the close of our lives we can make a free gift to help another person to have a better life. Your driver's licence can include the words "organ donor", and you can let your family know that you have made this choice. Healthy kidneys and other parts can be taken from people up to 70 years of age, and corneas (the clear window at the front of the eye) have been donated by people in their 90s.

Most of us have two kidneys, and we can live well with one. About 10% of kidney transplants in Australia come from living related donors. The decision to give a kidney to a much loved sister or child sounds simple enough. However, within some families unfair emotional pressures can be applied. Doctors usually insist on a private interview with any proposed donor to ensure that they are both well informed and truly willing.

The organ transplant story does not always end happily. Recipients usually have to take anti-rejection drugs for life, and the side-effects can be unpleasant. Suppressing the body's immune response increases the risks of infection and of some forms of cancer. In the past some donor families have felt neglected and denied adequate support in working through their time of grief.

In Australia the various state human tissue laws prevent commercial trading in human organs. In London, a specialist has been struck off the medical register for paying four Turkish people about $7500 each for a kidney for wealthy private patients. In Japan, loan sharks have taken kidneys as payments for debts. In Brazil, bodies washed up on the beach have been found to have had their kidneys surgically removed. Fortunately in the Australian system recipients can be confident that the organ has been matched to their tissue type, and that the donor will have been screened for HIV-AIDS and other transmissable infections.

To overcome the shortage of human organs scientists are developing special clean pigs. Pig organs are about the right size for humans, and genetic engineers are splicing human genes into the pigs to make their organs more acceptable to the human immune system. When I ask about the ethics of creating part-human pigs, I am told that if I eat ham or bacon I should not quibble about using pigs in other ways. Using pig organs for transplants does risk transmitting viral infections that are new to humans. HIV-AIDS moved from monkeys to humans, and the Hendra virus killed 16 horses and trainer Vic Rail in Queensland in 1994. A nastier virus than Hendra is one called Nipah, which killed thousands of pigs and 80 people in Malaysia in 1999. Our present knowledge of pig viruses is not enough to be sure that pig organs are safe for transplants.

Prof Leonard Bailey of the USA has written: "That organ transplantation even exists today is a tribute to the humanness of mankind. It derives from the compelling desire to help fellow human beings to live. Organ transplantation is here to stay because it works. It is here to stay because it fulfils a basic human need to help."