
Attitudes on Organ Donation among Hawaii Physicians

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Abstract

A survey of physicians attending the recent Hawaii Medical Association meeting was conducted in order to assess physician attitudes on organ donation. Physicians were asked 6 questions and demographics were collected. Results indicate that Hawaii physicians generally support organ donation and are aware of some of the current federal legislation regarding donation.

Introduction

Organ donation has increased in Hawaii over the past year. Intensive education of the hospital/physician staff, new federal legislation requiring reporting of all deaths and imminent deaths, and better training procedures for requesting donation have all contributed to this increase. Although we are fortunate to have more organs, we continue to seek ways in which to improve organ donation. Our transplant waiting list continues to grow and patients still die while awaiting organs.

Methods/Materials

Data was obtained from Hawaii physicians who attended the annual meeting of the Hawaii Medical Association on October 31, 1999 in Waikoloa, Hawaii. Each physician attending was given a one-page survey to complete. We asked the following questions:

1. Have you ever been involved in the care of a brain dead patient?
2. Have any of your patients received a transplant or are any currently on the transplant list?
3. Are you an organ donor?
4. Would you put pamphlets on organ donation in your waiting room?

We also asked two true/false questions to assess the physician's familiarity with the process of organ donation and federal regulations.

1. New federal legislation required hospitals to refer potential organ donors to the regional organ procurement organization.
2. A critical factor in influencing a family's decision to donate is the location and time of the request.

Finally, demographic data on age, sex, ethnicity and medical speciality was collected on each of the physician's responding to the survey. We divided physicians into two groups: Primary Care (Internal Medicine, Family Practice, and Pediatrics) and Specialist (all others).

Results

Of the 168 physicians who attended the Hawaii Medical Association annual meeting, 58 responded to this survey. Not all physicians answered all of the questions. Demographics were obtained on 46-50 physicians as there were a number of incompletely filled out surveys. Of the 48 physicians who reported demographic data, 38 were male and 10 were female. Age ranged from 30 to 80 years, with mean age of 51.8 years.

Of the 50 physicians reporting ethnicity, the distribution was as follows: Caucasian – 24, Chinese – 11, Japanese – 8, Filipino – 2, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander – 3, other Asian – 1, Black – 1.

Medical specialty was distributed as follows: Internal Medicine – 11, Family Practice – 9, Surgery/Surg specialty – 5, Pediatrics – 4, Psychiatry – 4, Obstetrics/Gynecology – 3, Emergency Medicine – 2, and Other – 6.

With regards to the specific questions, 37 of 57 respondees (64.9%) claimed that they have been involved in the care of a brain dead patient. 31 of 58 (53.4%) physicians responding, reported that they have had patients who either received a transplant or have patients currently on the waiting list for an organ transplant.

Of 56 physicians who responded to the third question, 32 (57.1%) stated that they were an organ donor, as listed on their drivers license. Three physicians who claimed not to be organ donors wrote down reasons—2 felt that they were not donors because of age and one claimed to have had hepatitis. There was no difference in the age or sex of those physicians who were donors vs nondonors. A greater percentage of specialist physicians (71.4%) stated that they were organ donors compared to primary care physicians (41.6%) (see table 1 on next page).

Most physicians— 50 of 54 (92.6%) stated that they would be willing to donate the organs of one of their loved ones. Of the four physicians not willing to donate the organs of a loved one, 3 of them were also not donors themselves.

A majority of physicians—50 of 58 (86.2%) would be willing to have pamphlets on organ donation in their waiting rooms. Half of the remaining 8 physicians who would not be willing to have these pamphlets, were not organ donors themselves. No physician in this survey claimed to be a non-donor, refused to donate organs of loved one and refused to have pamphlets on organ donation in their waiting room.

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Most (79.1%) of physicians surveyed realized that new federal legislation required hospitals to refer potential organ donors to the regional organ procurement organization. Five physicians were unaware of this legislation and 7 did not respond to this question. All physicians except one were aware that a critical factor in influencing a family's decision to donate is the location and time of request.

	Organ Donors (n=56)	Organ Non-donors (n=20)
Sex (Males:Females)	22:4	15:5
Age – range	36-76 years	30-80 years
Age – mean	54.3 years	48.6 years
Age distribution		
Age 30-49 years	8	6
Age 50-64 years	6	12
Age >64 years	7	6
Race:		
Caucasian	15	7
Chinese	6	4
Japanese	2	6
Hawaiian/Pac Isl	2	1
Filipino	1	1
Other	6	5
Specialty		
Primary Care	10	14
Specialist	15	6

Discussion

Organ transplantation remains the standard of care for treatment of end-stage organ disease. The ability of transplant physicians to treat these patients currently is limited primarily by the number of suitable organs. There are currently over 68,000 patients waiting for organs across the United States and nearly 200 waiting in Hawaii.

How does the public feel about organ donation? A poll of 6,127 people prepared by The Gallup Organization Inc, in 1993 showed that 85% supported the donation of organs for transplants. Of the polled population, 69% stated that they would be very/somewhat likely to donate their own organs. Twenty-five percent were felt that they were not likely to donate their own organs. The majority of the respondents who did not feel likely to donate gave no particular reason—they didn't know or had not given it much thought. Some of the other reasons included: medical reasons, too old, "don't want body cut up," "don't feel right about it," and religion.¹

Peters et al interviewed 102 people—51 who stated that they were

organ donors and 51 who claimed to be nondonors. Those who were donors tended to be more medically sophisticated and positive. They were more knowledgeable about the concept of brain death and felt that organ transplantation was effective. Nondonors, on the other hand, were more pessimistic and mistrustful of medicine. Comments included "A wealthy person will get the kidney," "it won't be done equitably," "doctors program the computer (for matching)" and "is it (the computer list) categorized by race?"²

But how about the health care professionals—what are their attitudes on organ donation? Molzahn et al surveyed 147 critical care nurses in Canada in 1997. Over 92% supported organ donation in principle, but only 65.3% had completed organ donor cards. Attitudes on organ donation were generally positive, but 85% of the nurses surveyed felt reluctant to approach potential donors.³

A study of 896 health care professionals in Louisiana including 59 neurosurgeons, 125 emergency medicine physicians, 267 critical care nurses and 445 other physicians revealed that they were generally satisfied with the organ procurement and transplantation system. There were still some concerns which included: lack of support by medical and lay community, high costs, potential profiteering, racial bias, organ request strategies, and conflict of interest.⁴

Weber et al, in a study of 759 physicians in Germany revealed that there was an overwhelming support for organ donation. Only 40% of physicians however, actually carried an organ donor card. Younger physicians and women were more likely to possess an organ donor card. The strongest predictors of willingness to donate one's own organs were (1) trust that doctors will act on behalf of the patient, even if he has a donor card, (2) security of death certification and (3) justice in organ allocation.⁵

Training of critical care nurses and physicians is essential to improve the rate of donation. Evanisko et al surveyed 1061 critical care staff from 28 hospitals in 4 different regions in the United States. Questionnaires assessed (1) factual knowledge about organ donation, (2) understanding of brain death, (3) previous training in procedures for requesting donation and (4) comfort levels with the donation process. Factual knowledge on donation and brain death were similar in various hospitals. In hospitals with high rates of organ donation, 52.9% of staff had received training. Those with low rates of organ donation, only 23.5% of staff had received training.⁶

In addition to appropriate training, federal regulations are helping to increase organ donation. In 1998 the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) issued Hospital Conditions of Participation for Organ, Tissue and Eye Donation that would require hospitals to refer all deaths and imminent deaths to Organ Procurement Organizations. This would allow identification of potential donors so families can be asked about donation. Both HCFA and the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) will evaluate hospital compliance of these new standards.^{7,8}

In the past, Hawaii has had the lowest number of organ donors of any state and also has had the lowest number of organs per million population. Intensive education of the hospital and physician staff as well as the general public has allowed our organ procurement organization (Organ Donor Center of Hawaii) to markedly improve the number of organs available for transplant in Hawaii. In 1999, 26 organ donors allowed 70 patients to receive transplants. This was the

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highest number of donors in any year since inception of the organization in 1987 and 62% higher than the previous year (16 donors).

This survey indicates that physicians in Hawaii support organ donation and are aware of some of the current practices in this area. Various demographic data involve small numbers, so it is difficult to make any definite conclusions. It is interesting to note that a lower proportion of primary care physicians are organ donors compared to specialist physicians (41% vs 71%). Perhaps we need to explore this further and redouble our efforts at working with the primary care physicians. Although Hawaii physicians are supportive of organ donation, we must continue efforts at education of both the medical/hospital staff and the public. For it is with education, that the people of Hawaii will continue to benefit from organ transplantation.

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