

Weaning China off organs from executed prisoners

Weaning China off harvesting organs from executed prisoners is a marathon not a sprint, according to Phelim Kine, the deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch. Indeed, this “marathon” is extraordinarily difficult and slow.

In 1984, harvesting organs from executed prisoners with reported consent either from them or their families was made legal in China. Internationally, this practice has been condemned by human rights organisations and the medical and scientific community. Ethical concerns rightly existed about coerced or non-existent consent and corruption in organ allocation. In 2011, Arthur Caplan and colleagues called for a boycott of Chinese science and medicine pertaining to organ transplantation unless it could be verified that the organ source was not an executed prisoner. On Dec 3, 2014, Jie fu Huang, the former vice-Minister of Health and leader of China’s organ donation and transplantation system reform, officially announced at a seminar of China’s Organ Procurement Organization that China would stop using executed prisoners as a source of organ transplants by Jan 1, 2015. After that date, only voluntarily donated organs from civilians can be used in transplants.

This decision is a very positive step forwards for China’s human rights record. It reflects the Chinese Government’s decision to address growing international concerns and put an end to the widely denounced practice. However, will the change happen? Despite having one of the largest organ transplant programmes in the world, China has one of the world’s lowest levels of organ donations, with a rate of only 0.6 per 1 million people. China was also the only country to use organs systematically from executed prisoners in transplantation procedures, and its organ procurement system has relied heavily on organs harvested from executed prisoners. Jie fu Huang and colleagues reported in *The Lancet* in 2011 that about 65% of transplants in China use organs from deceased donors, more than 90% of whom were executed prisoners.

Like other countries, demand for organs for transplantation heavily outnumbers supply in China. The country also confronts many barriers to organ donation. Culturally, the concept of organ donation contradicts the traditional Confucian view that one is born with a complete body, which should end the same way because the body, hair, and skin are gifts from

parents. Additionally, China has not been ready to accept socially (or adopt legally) the criteria for brain death in order to declare a death. Even some health professionals in China have a poor understanding of the concept of brain death. Cardiac death is still used as the basis for donation. But, above all, the most important problem lies in China’s organ donation and transplantation system. To move towards a more ethical, voluntary organ donation system, China has made a series of important preparations. In 2007, China implemented the Regulation on Human Organ Transplantation—the first legal framework for national oversight of China’s organ transplantation system. In 2010, a pilot programme of organ donation after cardiac death was initiated in 11 provinces and cities throughout China. In 2013, China’s Organ Transplant Response System—a national electronic organ allocation system—was established. However, as an emerging system, it has not yet gained full public confidence and support, and widespread doubts remain, as Jie fu Huang himself has pointed out—“people have concerns about whether the organs will be allocated in a fair, open, and just way”.

Given the existing low donation rate and the public’s concerns about participating in the donation programme, a switch from organs supplied mainly by executed prisoners to a voluntary system motivated by altruism will be very challenging. Furthermore, the burden of chronic diseases, especially end-stage kidney diseases, keeps climbing in China, which will inevitably exert more pressure on the existing system. There are concerns that a shortage of organs will lead to a flourishing black market trade, as has happened in China in the past.

Where does China go from here and how can China achieve national self-sufficiency in organ donation and transplantation? The transition requires a shift of public attitudes towards organ donation, integration of organ donation into national health systems, and implementation of medical strategies to prevent end-stage organ failure to reduce the need for organ transplantation. Stopping harvesting organs from executed prisoners should not be the end of the “marathon”, but the beginning of a new journey to establish a transparent, fair, and ethical system in China that complies with WHO standards for organ donation and allocation. ■ *The Lancet*



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For Arthur Caplan and colleagues’ paper see [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(11\)61536-5/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(11)61536-5/fulltext)

For more on China’s plans to end organ harvesting from executed prisoners see http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-12/04/content_19025683.htm

For Jie fu Huang and colleagues’ paper see [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(11\)61086-6/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(11)61086-6/fulltext)