

Summary of report

Human bodies: donation for medicine and research

Published 11 October 2011

The increasing possibilities for using human bodily material (such as organs, blood, eggs, sperm and whole bodies) in treatment and research, and the prevalence of conditions such as obesity and diabetes have contributed to high demand for all kinds of donated bodily material.

The Nuffield Council on Bioethics has published a report which considers how far society should go in encouraging people to donate their bodily material. The Council concludes:

- The state has a role both in trying to improve health to reduce the need for donated material, and also in helping to make donation for treatment and research as easy as possible.
- Altruism should continue to be at the heart of donation as it underpins important community values, but this does not exclude the possibility of some form of reward in some circumstances.
- Body parts should not be 'bought' or 'sold' directly, i.e. where money exchanges hands in direct return for body parts (rather than to reward or recompense donors for their act of donation).
- Paying healthy volunteers to take part in clinical trials is ethically justified.

The report sets out an 'Intervention Ladder' (see overleaf) to help policy makers consider the ethical acceptability of various ways of encouraging people to donate. A number of recommendations for policy are made, including:

Organ donation

- The Government should monitor closely how planned changes within the English NHS affect organ donation services, and should protect systems that have been shown to work well.
- The possibility of donating material after death for research purposes should be made clearer in public information about the Organ Donor Register.
- The NHS should introduce a pilot scheme to test the idea of meeting funeral expenses for those who sign the Organ Donor Register and subsequently die in circumstances where they could become organ donors.
- Robust research is needed on the effects of an opt-out system for organ donation if introduced in Wales as currently planned, in order to obtain a clear evidence base for any proposals for change elsewhere in the UK.

Egg and sperm donation

- A national or regional donor service should be established to provide an infrastructure for egg and sperm donation, along similar lines to the structures currently in place for blood and organ donation.
- The World Health Organization should develop guiding principles to protect egg donors from abuse or exploitation.
- Lost earnings should be fully reimbursed for those donating eggs or sperm for others' treatment, so that they are not left out of pocket.
- A pilot scheme should be introduced offering payment above and beyond expenses to those who are prepared to donate eggs for research purposes.

The report includes further recommendations in the areas of the use of tissue in research and volunteering for clinical trials.



An Intervention Ladder for promoting donation

The 'Intervention Ladder' is proposed as a useful tool for analysing the ethical acceptability of different forms of encouragement for donating bodily material in various circumstances.



The first four rungs of the Ladder are all 'altruist-focused interventions', intended to stimulate people's altruistic motivation. The two final rungs on the Ladder are 'non-altruist-focused interventions' where the reward offered is intended to be sufficient alone to prompt people to donate. It is an ethically significant step to move on to either of these two rungs, and scrutiny will be required to decide whether they may be ethically justified. Factors to consider include:

- the welfare of the donor and other affected individuals;
- the potential threat to the common good;
- the professional responsibilities of the health professionals involved; and
- the strength of the evidence on all these factors.

Copies of the report are available to download from the Council's website: www.nuffieldbioethics.org/donation

To order a printed copy please contact:

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