Public awareness of organ donation

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A telephone survey of public attitudes toward organ donation and transplantation was conducted in a community in southwestern Ontario. The subjects were selected at random; the response rate was 57%. Of the 50 respondents 62% stated that they had signed the organ donor card accompanying their driver's licence. These respondents were more likely than those who did not sign it to have discussed organ donation with their families. At least 80% of the respondents said they would agree to donate their organs and those of their next-of-kin, and 80% said that the organ donor card should be considered a legal document. Organ transplantation was regarded by all but one respondent as an acceptable medical procedure. Also discussed were concerns about organ donation and possible strategies to improve the availability of organs for transplantation.

Enquête téléphonique dans une ville du sud-ouest de l'Ontario sur les opinions de la population quant au don et à la greffe d'organes. Parmi les sujets choisis au hasard 57% répondent. Des 50 répondants 62% disent avoir signé la carte de consentement qui accompagne le permis de conduire. Ceux qui ont signé, plus souvent que ceux qui n'ont pas signé, avaient parlé du don d'organes avec leur famille. Plus de 80% des répondants consentiraient à donner leurs organes et ceux de leur plus proche parent. Pour 80% des répondants la carte de consentement devrait avoir force de loi. Tous, à l'exception d'un seul, considèrent que la greffe d'organes est une bonne chose du point de vue médical. On discute aussi de certaines inquiétudes au sujet du don d'organes et des moyens d'augmenter la disponibilité des organes pour fins de greffe.

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The public's negative attitude toward organ donation is consistently cited as the major factor in the current shortage of organs for transplantation.[1-3] It has been estimated that if 50% of possible donor situations actually resulted in donations such a shortage would not exist.[4]

In general, public opinion surveys have found that while most people have a positive attitude toward organ donation and transplantation this seldom results in concrete action.[2,3] A 1983 survey by the Kidney Foundation of Canada found that while 90% of the respondents agreed with the concept of organ donation, only 20% had signed a donor card.[4] A 1984 study in Ontario had similar findings: 89.1% of the respondents had heard of organ donor cards, but only 25.5% stated that they had signed one.[1] A comparison of the results from Gallup polls in 1983[1] and 1987 (*Toronto Star*, Mar. 16, 1987: page A2) showed an increase, from 21% to 25%, in the proportion of people who had signed an organ donor card. The results of a survey on public attitudes, commissioned by the Ontario Ministry of Health's task force on kidney donation, indicated a resistance to expressing support for organ donation and transplantation by signing organ donor cards.[5] In that survey 60 individuals —

people who had signed an organ donor card, people who had not signed a card and parents of children who had their driver's licence — underwent a 2-hour interview. To our knowledge, no population-based studies have been done in Canada.

We conducted a small survey to ascertain public attitudes toward organ donation and the bases for these attitudes and thus to identify predictors of attitude and behaviour.

Methods

We developed a questionnaire based on the literature to date and conducted a telephone survey in a city of 80 000 people in southern Ontario. While most of the questions had multiple-choice answers, several were open-ended so as to identify issues that were not suggested by the literature.

The subjects were selected from listed telephone numbers by the use of a table of random numbers. Only one person, aged 18 years or older, per household was selected because of the expected correlation in responses among people in the same household. If there was no answer when the call was placed, the interviewer was instructed to try the number two more times over the next 2 weeks before removing it from the list. Those contacted were asked if, for purposes of research on kidney transplantation, they would be willing to answer questions on medical procedures.

Results

Of the 88 people contacted by telephone 50 (57%) were willing to be questioned. Their demographic characteristics are shown in Table I. There were no significant differences between the respondents who stated that they had signed the organ donor card accompanying their driver's licence and those who had not. However, more of the respondents who had signed the organ donor card (20 of 31) than of those who had not signed it (4 of 14) had discussed organ donation with their families ($p = 0.027$).

Organ transplantation was viewed as accepted medical treatment by all but one of the respondents (Table II). At least 80% of the respondents said they would agree to organ donation for themselves and their next-of-kin. Also, 80% felt that the organ donor card should be a legal document whose provisions should not be usurped by the next-of-kin.

Newspapers or magazines and television were cited by 90% of the respondents as being the primary sources of information about organ transplantation. The driver's licence itself was cited by 32%. The two most frequently cited determinants of whether the respondents would agree to organ donation were altruism (cited by 40%) and the knowledge that a friend or relative needed an organ (cited by 32%).

There were several specific concerns about organ donation and transplantation, the two most common being that financial status might determine who would receive an organ transplant (cited by 16%) and that the donated organ might be of inferior quality or from a carrier of human immunodeficiency virus (cited by 10%). We did not find a differential reaction to the type of organ donation; that is, the respondents were as support-

Table I — Demographic characteristics of respondents and number who had signed an organ donor card

Characteristic*	No. of respondents	No. who had signed an organ donor card†
Sex		
Male	19	14
Female	30	16 (25)
Age, yr		
< 40	24	17 (23)
≥ 40	23	14 (19)
Religious preference		
Protestant	31	18 (28)
Catholic	10	4 (8)
None	9	9
Level of education		
Less than high school	13	6 (10)
High school, some college or university	21	15 (19)
College or university graduate	15	10
Marital status		
Married	35	19 (31)
Never married	13	11
Widowed	2	1 (1)

*Four of the respondents did not state their sex, age or level of education.
†Numbers in parenthesis indicate number of people answering the question about organ donor cards if different from the total number of respondents.

Table II — Respondents' answers to questions on organ donation and transplantation

Response	No. (and %) of respondents
Organ transplantation is an acceptable form of medical treatment	49 (98)
Want next-of-kin to give consent for donation of organs	42 (84)
Willing to give consent for donation of organs from next-of-kin	40 (80)
Has discussed organ donation with family	27 (54)
A signed donor card should be a legal document whose provisions should not be usurped by next-of-kin	40 (80)
Familiar with the term brain death	41 (82)
Acceptable that a person should be maintained on a life support system for organ donation	38 (76)
A central registry should be established as organs become available	49 (98)

ive of kidney transplantation as they were of heart or other organ transplantation. The respondents who stated that it was acceptable to maintain a person on a life support system for purposes of organ donation (38 of 50) were also queried on what would be an acceptable length of time. Surprisingly, most (27 of 38) said that 48 hours or more was acceptable. Finally, 12 of the 14 respondents who said that they had not signed the organ donor card said that they were willing to do so.

Discussion

We have demonstrated the feasibility of a random population-based survey of public attitudes toward organ donation. The results give some insight into factors affecting behaviour. Since 62% of the respondents had signed a donor card, and since the response rate was 57%, we estimated that at least 35% of the population has signed a donor card. Our findings on the factors that influence behaviour are necessarily restricted, however, to the people who responded to the survey.

Further research into the issues and concerns about organ donation and transplantation is essential for the development of public education strategies. The disparity between the numbers of respondents who were willing to donate organs and of those who had already signed a donor card suggests that the solution to the current shortage of organs for transplantation is not solely an increase in public acceptance of the procedure. The goal may be to ensure that people who are willing to sign an organ donor card do so and make their intentions known to their families. Approximately one-third of the respondents cited the driver's licence as a source of information on organ donation. Thus, the donor card should receive more attention in public education campaigns. Because there is support for making the organ donor card a legal document, a central registry of names of people who have given consent might also be considered.

References

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