Organ Donation and Transplantation in General Practice

Abstract:
Raising public awareness of organ donation is high on the national agenda, but the magnitude of the challenge is not well clarified. We investigated the attitudes and experience of general practitioners (GPs) regarding organ donation. A total of 200 GPs were randomly selected from the Irish College of General Practitioners database and, following ethical approval, conducted an anonymous postal questionnaire. The questionnaire contained 9 items including provision of information by GPs, provision of organ donor cards in general practices, GPs individual practice discussion regarding organ donation, self reported ability and confidence to offer information regarding procedures surrounding organ retrieval, living donor retrieval, organ transplantation and immunosuppression and whether GPs themselves carried organ donor cards.

Results
We received 125 return questionnaires, representing a 62.5% response rate. We found that 62% (n=77) of GP did not provide organ donor cards for the general public in the reception/waiting area, with 28.2% (n=35) having informed patients about organ donation. Although 81.3% (n=100) of GPs felt comfortable discussing organ donation with their patients, only 4.6% (n=6) stated that they opportunistically broach the subject of organ donation with patients who attended their clinics or asked them to discuss the issue with their families. From the past 3 months consultations, 88.7% (n=110) of GPs could not remember any instance of a patient asking for counselling or information regarding organ donation. When asked if each felt adequately well informed to offer patients information, 52% of eligible GPs carried an organ donor card (n=62).

Discussion
This study suggests there is a paucity of dialogue in the primary healthcare setting in Ireland regarding organ donation in the general population, and a problem mirrored nationally in many other countries. The prevalence of end-stage kidney disease (ESKD) in the Republic of Ireland continues to grow, with latest figures from the National Renal Office showing 620 patients per million population (p.m.p) affected, and 37% incident patients are deceased patients. The incidence of these incident patients are treated by haemodialysis (43%), with a small number are receiving a pre-emptive transplant (2.5%). Overall, 52% of the ESKD population has a functioning renal transplant, the optimal therapy for ESKD. In recent years there has been a significant increase in the waiting list for potential recipients of a deceased donor renal transplant to over 600 patients, with 2010 seeing the worst decline in organ donation on record in Ireland; 98 deceased donor renal transplants in 2010 compared to 172 in 2009. Traditionally, Ireland has enjoyed a generous deceased organ donation rate, but at 12.6 p.m.p. in 2010 this ranked outside the top twenty European countries. In European countries such as Spain and Austria, high deceased donor rates (32 p.m.p. and 23.3p.m.p. in 2010, respectively) have been previously attributed to opt-out legislation. One of the key areas in Ireland may be the education of the general population at the front line of healthcare, as well as through mainstream media outlets. Currently available limited evidence from Spain suggests that there is a lack of information being transmitted about organ donation in the setting of primary healthcare, in line with our findings in Ireland, but that GPs do have a very favourable attitude towards organ donation and that when discussed in this setting it may form strong positive attitudes in potential donors. With the recent introduction of the National Office for Organ Donation and Transplantation, which are successfully increasing deceased donor rates in this country, it is hoped that we can begin to cultivate public awareness. There is some evidence in the literature supporting increasing deceased donor rates in the UK, through education programmes. In the national transplantation registry it has currently captured 29% of the population, which, although under-represents the widespread support for organ donation in general populations in many surveys internationally, and does not have a legal standing, does serve as a focal point to advertise the issue of organ donation, allows for quantification and tracking of the progress being made in the campaign and promotes some debate in the national arena. Other avenues, such as the possible evolution of paired donor exchange programme, either on a national basis or more likely in conjunction with UK centres, and use of organs from non-heart beating donors (donation after cardiac death), which provides the UK with just over one third (36.9%) of their deceased organ donations at present, will also need to be considered. In conclusion, there is a lack of focus and detailed knowledge on organ donation and transplantation at the level of primary healthcare, which may likely be representative of the national attitude towards organ donation. It is going to take a significant paradigm shift and investment in education for both healthcare providers and the general population in order for Ireland to match the deceased organ donation rates of the top European countries, and ensure that more of our patients receive the optimal treatment for ESKD. Consistent public awareness programs, backed up by an informed
primary care community who feel at ease discussing and promoting the fundamental principles of organ donation with potential donors and their families are critical parts of a multifaceted program aimed at improving organ donation rates in this country.

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References