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New Light On Organ Trafficking

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The FBI knew about a Brooklyn-based organ merchant working within the Jewish community here and in Israel as far back as 2002, but for unknown reasons, did not act against him until last week.

That's the claim of Nancy Scheper-Hughes, a medical anthropologist at the University of California, Berkeley. She says she learned about the alleged involvement of Levi-Yitchak Rosenbaum in illegal organ trafficking through visits to foreign countries where people were either coerced or deceived to come to New York, where they would be paid \$10,000 for a kidney that could be sold for between \$160,000 to \$200,000.

"I used my ethnographic skills to connect the dots," Scheper-Hughes, who is writing a book on organ trafficking, said on WNYC radio Friday. "Eventually that brought me to Isaac Rosenbaum."

She said she then gathered information on Rosenbaum with the help of an informant within the operation who had a sore conscience and identified himself as David Hamilton. "He said to me, I'm a religious person, I just want to get out of here," Scheper-Hughes told WNYC's Brian Lehrer.



Scheper-Hughes, who could not be reached by *The Jewish Week*, said on the radio that Rosenbaum would tell potential donors that, if anyone asked, they should say they were being compensated for travel expenses but not for selling the organs, and that his business was expensive because "you have to schmear everybody," ostensibly referring to bribery.

She said transplants of sold organs were performed at Mount Sinai Medical Center here and Albert Einstein Medical Center in Philadelphia.

Asked by Lehrer whether the hospitals were aware that the organs had been sold, Scheper Hughes said: "My sense is, how could some of them not have known? The [donors] that arrived, some of them didn't speak the same languages. They were poor and they were disoriented and the patients receiving these organs were also from another country ... We have rules, we have transplant coordinating committees, ethical guidelines and you don't just let people walk in off the street."

She said she has a video of a man who taped himself being subjected to what she calls a "very superficial screening" before donating a kidney at Mount Sinai.

A spokesperson for the hospital, Brenda Perez, said in a statement: "Mount Sinai's transplant screening process is rigorous and comprehensive, and assesses each donor's motivation. All donors are clearly advised that it is against the law to receive money or gifts for being an organ donor. Organs from deceased donors are equally subjected to high scrutiny."

But, Perez added, "The pre-transplant evaluation may not detect premeditated and skillful attempts to subvert and defraud the evaluation process."

This week's arrest of Rosenbaum cast a new light on the dark world of organ trafficking, which has been considered an urban myth by some law enforcement officials, until now.

But it also called attention to efforts to legalize paid organ donation, which has support among some halachic authorities as a means of saving lives.

Robby Berman, executive director of the Halachic Organ Donor Society, says 3,000 Americans and 100 Israelis die each year of kidney failure.

“Although there are two sides to the debate, there are many prominent rabbis who support giving financial incentives to encourage people to donate their kidneys,” said Berman. “Admittedly there are many social concerns, such as the exploitation of poor people. [But] it is my personal opinion that this option of legalizing payments along with government oversight and supervision should be seriously explored.” Legalization of payments to donors, which could bring about insurance coverage, would shut down the black market, said Berman.

“The illegality of it,” he said, “fuels the exploitation.”

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