

Robyn Urback: What Canada can learn from Israel on organ donation



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In 2008, the Israeli Knesset passed new organ donation laws that gave transplant priority to patients who had signed their own donor cards.

When Canadians must resort to online ads to find themselves human organs for transplant, we might have a bit of a problem on our hands. Yet a Nova Scotia man took to online classifieds this month in a desperate attempt to find himself a new kidney. Ken Wilkie, who has polycystic kidney disease, posted an ad on Kijiji on November 7 under the title “Boost Your Karma.”

“I am a hard-working father of two, I don’t drink, smoke or do drugs,” Wilkie said in the post, “so I promise I will look after your kidney.” Wilkie received about 40 replies from people willing to get tested to see if they are a match before the ad was removed in accordance with the site’s terms of use.

Wilkie’s disease is genetic, meaning that his immediate family members are ineligible to donate. He did have a donor lined up, but tests revealed that the would-be donor had cervical cancer. Wilkie jokingly talked about putting an ad on Kijiji after receiving the news, and he decided later to follow through.

Organ donation in Nova Scotia is restricted by conditions under the Human Organ and Tissue Donation Act, which states that there can be no economic incentive to the living organ donor. In other words, you can’t buy a kidney. Wilkie found a loophole in his promise of good “karma,” however, since karma can’t be used to finance a loan. The implicit idea is that if you do a good deed, a good deed will later come to you.

But for many, this intangible incentive is not incentive enough. Though the majority of Canadians say they support organ and tissue donation, according to the Canadian Transplant Society, less than 25% have made plans to donate. Rates of donation have stagnated since 2006, while more and more would-be recipients get in line for new organs.

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Obviously the system isn't working. Hundreds of Canadians die waiting, or are removed from, transplant lists each year. But despite the clear failings of the current system, provincial governments are hesitant to adopt meaningful change. Prince Edward Island last year considered an opt-out model of presumed consent, which has proven successful in countries such as Spain and Portugal. But the proposition was abandoned and the status quo remains, leaving compassion and generosity as the main motivators for Canadian donors.

It's a noble system, but a naive one. Absent real impetus, Canadians will continue to shrug off calls to sign their donor cards. Israel figured that out more than five years ago, when the country ranked among the worst of Western nations for organ donation. There were several factors at play then (and still now), including questions of *Halacha* or Jewish law that forbids the desecration of a dead body, and the rabbinic definition of death, which to some is considered only after the heart stops beating, irrespective of brain stem death.

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In 2008, the Israeli *Knesset* passed new organ donation laws that gave transplant priority to patients who had signed their *own* donor cards. Living donors were also offered new compensation for lost wages and medical expenses. The change was accompanied by a massive public awareness campaign, which resulted in 70,000 new donors signing up in 10 weeks. According to Israel's National Transplant Center, the number of transplants increased dramatically in 2011 — 68% over the previous year. That figure waned from 2011 to 2012, though Israel's Health Minister Yael German is now pushing for the country to adopt an opt-out system.

Israel's priority system should serve as a model to Canadian legislators in terms of exploring models beyond altruistic donation. Good karma is great, but a promise to jump the line should the potential donor become the recipient is even better — especially since Canada doesn't grapple with the same sort of religious barriers to donation as does Israel. At the very least, it certainly beats Kijiji.

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