



Vehicular organ donor campaign could backfire

This month a new organ donor campaign called ‘Second Chance’ was launched in California to try to save more lives. This campaign could backfire and actually kill more people than save.

Policemen in the cities of Fullerton and Placentia California who stop a driver for a driving infraction will now issue a “Second Chance” ticket instead of a fine if the driver’s license indicates they are an organ donor. Presumably the news of this benefit – getting out of traffic tickets – will spread and more people will register as organ donors.

I assume that Donate Life in California, one of the federally funded agencies known as an Organ Procurement Organization (OPO), and McCann advertising had the best of intentions when they conceived this creative campaign. But let me make a few points that might give them cause for pause.

First, there is the phenomenon of unintended consequences. It is very possible that because of this campaign a certain percentage of registered organ donor drivers will feel they can drive a bit faster and not fully stop at Stop signs

because they know they will not get a traffic ticket. This behavior will endanger themselves and other people on the road.

Second, offering people a non-altruistic incentive to become registered organ donors will cast aspersions on the intention of all registered organ donors. Maybe families will think their loved one didn't really want to be an organ donor but simply registered to get the benefit of getting out of speeding tickets. Why is what the family thinks important?

Because being a registered organ donor doesn't force the hospital to remove organs. It simply expresses the intent of the deceased. The family always has the last word, and without familial permission, no organs will be recovered even in the face of an organ donor card. While this is a rare occurrence it has happened. With campaign "Second Chance" there are more reasons for this to happen. It gives the family reason to doubt the intentions of the registered organ donor.

The Opt-Out system is similarly problematic. Opt Out, all the rage in Europe, presumes everyone wants to be an organ donor unless they opt out of the system by contacting local authorities. Opt Out was rejected in the United States and in Israel because it, among other reasons, gives the family yet another excuse not to donate: 'My son didn't want to be an organ donor; he was just lazy and never got around to opting out.'

Another illustrative example happened in Israel. The Israeli Parliament passed a law in 2009 that also gave a non-altruistic motive for people to become an organ donor. The law said that anyone who had been a registered organ donor for at least three years and then became ill and needed an organ transplant to survive will get priority on the waiting list over someone who was not a registered donor. How did this work out? The ultimate benefit – life itself – had only a marginal impact on Israeli organ donor rates.

Not only wasn't it effective in moving the needle on registration rates, the law cast aspersion on the motives of registered donors. Now a family can say: my son didn't really want to be an organ donor. He simply cynically registered for organ donation just for the benefit of getting priority on the waiting list.

I appreciate what the OPO in California is trying to do. California has more registered drivers than any other state in America and people are dying every day due to the dearth of organ donors. I don't believe, however, that "Second Chance" will have a positive impact on increasing organ donation and quite the contrary; I think it will reduce donation and maybe cause more car accidents.

The path to increasing organ donation is not to seduce people to consent for non-altruistic reasons. The proper path is the straight one: raise public awareness about the need for organ donors, educate the public about the process of organ donation and address the medical, religious, and psychological concerns of different ethnic groups.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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