

This response was submitted to the consultation held by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics on Give and take? Human bodies in medicine and research between April 2010 and July 2010. The views expressed are solely those of the respondent(s) and not those of the Council.

**ORGAN DONORS – NUFFIELD COUNCIL ON BIOETHICS
April 2010**

From Councillor John Meikle MBE, Taunton Deane Borough Council.

Dear Professor Strathern.

I read with interest a newspaper article on endeavours to increase the organ donor volunteers under your chairmanship.

Between 1999 – 2003, I was able to persuade 700,000 UK citizens to sign up on the national organ donor register.

I felt it might be helpful if I related the means by which this total was achieved.

The Story.

I persuaded our Taunton Deane Mayor to insert an appeal letter which I had written, into the September envelope which every elector receives from the local authority enclosing an electoral form to record the people who are entitled to vote from that address.

On the back of his letter were two columns for the electors to register on the national organ donor register, and fill in their details, and pop the Mayor's letter back into the same envelope with the official form to the Town Hall.

(No cost at all, except the letter heading paper of the Mayor!)

My letter was deliberately an emotional appeal from a local community leader. My memory of the opening paragraph was **'As your Mayor can I ask you to imagine yourself in a giant aircraft hanger, in which there are six thousand beds with hundreds of doctors and nurses in attendance. These represent the total number of UK patients needing an organ transplant. Imagine the distress and trauma of the relatives each year as five hundred die and have to be wheeled out, because an organ never arrived in time for them.**

My fellow citizens, this waste of human life is quite unnecessary because there are plenty of us who are more than willing to sign up onto the national organ donor register..... etcetc.....

Out of 80,000 Taunton electors, 7,500 were returned within three weeks = 9.1% of the total electorate

My thinking was simple – if Taunton could do it, so could every other Council in the UK. For three years I personally wrote to every Chief Executive of every Council in the UK, and presented them with the letter and its purpose, and asked them to persuade their Mayor, or Council Chairman to emulate Taunton Deane.

Over five years. Eight million letters were sent out, and nearly 700,000 registrations were made. 8.6% of the electorate. Attached to this E Mail is the list produced by the NHS UK Transplant Headquarters in Bristol to summarising the contributions of the 70 Councils.

WHY DID I STOP?

Because some Council Electoral Officer wrote to the Electoral Commission and asked if it was proper for their September Electoral Form to have another paper inserted in the same envelope? There had been no complaints to the Electoral Commission from the hundreds of thousands of letters that had already been sent. Yet the Electoral Commission decided to uphold the sanctity of the envelope, and wrote to every Council in the UK, indicating that they did not favour this practice. I had a real row with the then Chairman of the Commission.

I went to the UK Transplant HQ CEO, and said we must fight this ruling. Only to be told that from 'on high', the Health Minister (Jacki Smith) had let it be known that NHS UK Transplant should not contest the decision of the Electoral Commission.

Thus 2003 saw the close down of my project. I could have raised another million registrations over the next two or three years, as the bandwagon was expanding at a rate.

Because of this bureaucratic action I believe hundreds have died unnecessarily.

WHERE NOW?

Assertions I would make in 2010.

1. Given the right approach, nearly 10% of the UK electorate would sign up within three weeks of receiving a letter.
- 2 The success of the project rested on the grass roots approach with the local Mayor, or Chairman sending a personal civic letter of appeal to each household.
- 3 There were no retardants in the system. The Electoral form had to be filled in, and the back of the Mayor's letter was handy. Just slide both into the post paid envelope destined for the Town Hall. There can be no cheaper method of gaining hundreds of thousands of new organ donors.

2010 - ACTION?

1. On a two year plan, something between two and four million organ donors could be signed up, IF the Electoral Commission were challenged on the reasons for their previous stance, in the hope that they would remove this retardant.
2. Given a little clerical and postage help, I would be very prepared to renew my previously successful approach to the Council Chief Executives to re-launch the organ donor local grass roots appeals.
3. If the Electoral Commission refused to alter their recommendation, then the project could still proceed at a very much greater cost. i.e. the NHS would have to reimburse the local council with the cost of its envelopes, letter, postage, and return post envelope.

(I have no idea the present cost per donor of getting (say) 10,000 registrations.)

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