

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.

Dr Ray Abrahams

Introductory comment: I became interested in this issue as an academic anthropologist a little over 20 years ago in the context of a festschrift on 'The Generation and Maintenance of the Person' for Prof. John Barnes' 70th birthday. This was edited by W. Shapiro and published in the Australian Journal of Anthropology, 1990 1:2-3. An online version of my paper is available at <http://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/~rga1000/> under the title "[Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose?](#)" Although it is a pioneer piece, and well thought of by those who have read it, the paper is not widely known perhaps because of the uninformative nature of the title! In addition to topics touched on below, I also explore some broad comparabilities between organ donation etc. and some customs in other cultures, such as forms of widow inheritance and providing offspring for the dead through so-called 'ghost marriage'.

I offer a few remarks on specific questions.

Q2 My own and several other findings suggest that eyes and hearts carry a very high symbolic-value load compared with other organs which are seen more as spare parts. I discuss a case on p. 144 of my paper. My suspicion is that some medical professionals may be less likely than an anthropologists to attach weight to such 'irrationalities' - but I understand that 'not my eyes' has been a common rider on donor cards.

Q3 In the course of my reading and research, I became aware of cases where the risks of kidney donation caused friction between married siblings etc. This fits a common pattern where family of birth can come into conflict with the families established by their individual members in many different contexts. An interesting issue here is that the balance between kinship and marriage is culturally weighted by westerners in favour of marriage, whereas the most 'natural' donors in terms of tissue matching are siblings. I understand that improved immunity drugs are making spouse-donation more feasible. It is also possible that the kinship-marriage balance may change in our mainstream society, and it is certainly true that serious cross-cultural differences exist, though I am not clear on the extent of this in Britain (see below).

Q6 Human capacity for 'evil' is all too obvious. Provision for financial gain (especially of 3rd parties) is obviously an undesirable risk, let alone use for magic (as in some alleged East African cases) or making household goods (Nazi Germany).

Q11 This is a key issue, arising out of the continuing scarcity of genuine volunteer donors.

I consider truly voluntary donation is most desirable. The considerable literature on the use of organs from (prematurely?) executed criminals or those driven by extreme poverty to endanger themselves for the sake of money for self or family points to many real hazards in a complex globalised world. With back reference to Q2, it is also clear also from Liverpool and other cases, that professional medics may easily underestimate the sacred quality bereaved parents may attach to the organs etc. of their deceased young children.

Q12 Arguably yes. An example might be between siblings as mentioned. But moral duties do not exist in isolation. They are often in conflict not simply with selfish motives but also with other moral duties (e.g. brother to brother versus husband/father to wife and children).

Q14 Arguably yes. Again, in such cases one has to think about alternatives and their potential consequences. Always the question of striking a balance is crucial. Unfortunately shortage of funds seems likely to impinge increasingly heavily on such choices.

Q15 -19 All I can suggest to this central issue is that it is a genuine 'minefield', which I am sure the committee know only too well. The idea of one or other forms of compensation may provide some relatively harm-free improvement in supply. Q20 See above re inter-spouse live donation. Improved immunity drugs may be helpful here and in other contexts.

Q22 It is hard to see an answer here, as coercion itself is not an uncontentious term. There seem to be inter-cultural differences re family influences on members' marriages, but I do not know if these extend to cases in question here.

Q30 When writing my original paper, I was interested as an anthropologist in questions of cultural difference between different groups both here in Britain and more widely. Information was disappointingly extremely thin and scarcely any had been collected by anthropologists who seem the best qualified scholars for such a task. I was also interested in questions of inter-ethnic donation and again precious little data were available. These still seem vital areas to me - it is possible that significantly more has become known since my own main work. Certainly I am aware of interesting work on Japan in this context. Britain is becoming an increasingly diverse and, regretfully diverse, society and these questions seem likely to increase in salience.

Dr Abrahams also asked that the following points be included in his response:

1. At the time of my own research (late 1980s), there was a great deal of anxiety about the definition of death (even though 'brain stem death' had become the adopted standard) and media (mis)coverage had apparently had a negative influence on rates of donation.

2. It was also general practice at the time for doctors as gatekeepers to take a negative stance towards the establishment of relations between donor and recipient individuals and families. An exception which apparently worked very well was the careful provision of such possibilities at the Royal Victoria in Newcastle. I suspect that practice may be changing these days.

3. 1 above and other factors suggest, inter alia, that education (and responsible media coverage) at different levels of society may have an important role to play in helping people to make sensible decisions on donation - though it does seem that 'globally' at least worries that have been entertained about it have not been wholly unfounded.