

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.

Mark O'Sullivan

Dear Sirs

I believe that for most of us the suggestion of more formal and substantial incentives for organ donation raises two main issues. One is the quality of the organs donated, and the other the morality of a mercantile basis of reward in such cases.

The post-war Titmuss research on blood donation is directly relevant in both issues. Despite being challenged by well-funded commercial interests, it remains essentially intact, and has led to the World Health Organization introducing a 100% unpaid and voluntary blood donation policy in 1997. Shortage of organs has already led to them being accepted from donors older than might be ideal, and introducing financial incentives would risk opening the floodgates to donation by substance abusers and others at the margin of society who are more likely to be exposed to infectious disease and to have damaged immune systems, and whose blood is therefore more likely to be contaminated. This would increase screening costs, and expose transfusees to risks of infection both through error and by diseases or poisons for which screening is not yet available.

We live in a society in which all our relationships are to some extent commercialised, and this tendency seems to be driven faster and faster by ever more powerful market forces. However, not all of us are happy with this, whether for social, ethical or religious reasons. Professor Strathern is among those whose writings have remorselessly laid bare the ways in which this is often a clandestine process. I believe strongly that some values need to be held as humanitarian ones which are beyond a simple price calculation, but are maintained as a declaration of the nature of our own society, and as part of the process whereby it sustains its own character and cohesion. The donation of parts of the human body is one of our most powerful symbols in this. It must remain an altruistic act; otherwise, whatever the risks of biological contamination of the organs donated, we will surely contaminate our society in a moral sense.

Best wishes

Mark O'Sullivan