Are we ready for presumed consent for organ donation?

There have been calls for an opt-out organ donation system but we must consider the ethical issues of this, says Ruhi Behi

Gordon Brown is in favour of presumed consent for organ donation. He believes that many more lives will be saved if the UK adopts the same system as countries such as Spain and Austria.

Opposition to an opt-out system is usually on ethical/moral grounds and/or because there is a lack of sufficient evidence that donation rates increase and more lives are saved with presumed consent.

Even if the evidence exists, should we as a society accept this proposed system if we have major ethical/moral concerns about it?

A recent systematic review considered the evidence and concluded that ‘presumed consent is associated with increased organ donation rates’ (Rithalia et al, 2009). However, it also found that other factors, such as ‘potential donors, the underpinning infrastructure for transplantation, wealth and investment in health care, and underlying public attitudes’, have an impact on donation rates.

The review suggests that further evidence is needed and that it would be wrong if society and the government believed we could achieve higher organ donation rates without, at the same time, doing other things. For example, we need to communicate why presumed consent is needed, how it would work and the safeguards for such a system. This information would help to encourage people not to opt out.

But should we not do more to increase organ donations in the present opt-in system?

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Reference

For details of an RCN survey on presumed consent, see Letters p36

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