

'Give and Take'

People in England who wish to donate their organs after death currently have to 'opt in' through the donor card scheme. The government however would like to change this and introduce a system of "presumed consent", whereby organs from an adult's body could be used for transplants without express permission.

It is easy to understand their reasoning. NHS figures show that 457 people died waiting for a transplant last year, because a suitable organ was not available. If the number of donated organs could significantly be increased, lives would be saved. Roberto Cacciola, a kidney transplant specialist at Bart's hospital in London, writes:

"As a transplant surgeon I'm delighted with and excited by this initiative because there's a chronic need for more organs and therefore for more donors to come forward."

Fiona Loud, policy director at the charity *Kidney Care UK*, commented:

"The government has done the right thing and made a vital step towards increasing donations and transplantation."

It is not yet clear whether the proposed change would result in the desired increase in available organs, though I suspect it might. In Wales, for example, where an opt-out system was introduced in 2015, there has actually been a small dip in the number of deceased donors.

Leaving aside the statistics, however, there are important moral and social issues which ought to be considered before such a major change is made.

Prof. Fabre of Kings College London, for example, argues that it could "degrade the ethical framework of our society... into one of the state taking back what it thinks is its, while intruding on one of the most personal and delicate moments of a family's life... We would become nationalised property that the state reclaims after our death."

Instead of donation being an expression of solidarity between people, it could be seen as a violation of the dead.

When Gordon Brown sought to bring in the same system in 2008, he abandoned it after a taskforce he set up to investigate the practicalities of doing so advised against it. Although many doctors (including the BMA) supported the move, others felt that it could cause tension in the relationship between doctors providing end-of-life care and patients and their relatives. Dr. Peter Saunders, chief executive of the *Christian Medical Fellowship*, has pointed to the misleading use of language:

"We strongly support organ donation but so-called presumed consent involves neither consent nor donation – it is neither voluntary nor informed and involves taking organs rather than giving them."

Pope John Paul II, from a Roman Catholic viewpoint, echoes these concerns:

"Above all, this form of treatment is inseparable from a *human act of donation*...It is a decision to offer, without reward, a part of one's own body for the health and well-being of another person."

Whatever we decide, we must uphold the God-given dignity of every human being and our Christian commitment to the common good.