

HEALTH REPORT

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POLL SHOWS AUSTRALIANS ACCEPT ANIMAL ORGAN TRANSPLANTS BUT UNDER-INFORMED

New research released today shows that if faced with a life or death situation, seven-in-10 Australians would be willing to accept an organ from an animal to save their life.

The finding comes from a national study conducted for Transplant Australia and research-based medicines company Pfizer Australia, published in the latest issue of the Pfizer Australia Health Report.

Animal-to-human transplants – xenotransplants – are controversial and have so far been limited to pig heart valves and bone from coral in Australia.

“The broader issue is that there is overwhelming demand for viable and suitable organs and we need to look at all options,” said Dr Harding, a medical researcher, liver transplant recipient and President of the NSW branch of Transplant Australia.

“With 2000 Australians current awaiting transplants, and another 7000 on dialysis that may benefit from a kidney replacement, supply is an issue.

“Transplant Australia estimates that one-in-five people waiting for a heart, liver, kidney or lung transplant will die before receiving one, and the lack of suitable donors means that many will not even make it onto a waiting list.”

The research shows that most Australians are severely overestimating the number of organ donations occurring each year, believing the figure to be between 500 and 5000, when in 2003 it was only 179.

Dr Harding said that despite this misconception, the polling shows 77 percent of Australians are comfortable with the concept of organ donation.

“These figures all build a case for better education, especially in the area of people not only indicating their consent for organ or tissue donation but proactively discussing their wishes with their extended family,” Dr Harding said.

“While people can tick a box on their driver’s licence or register with the Australian Organ Donor Registry, the final permission rests with the next-of-kin at the time of donation.”

While most Australians consider organ donation an important issue - and 52 percent of those surveyed have indicated willingness to donate, either via their driver’s licence or through the Australian Organ Donor Registry - 35 percent of the people polled have not formally indicated their wishes in any way.

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"Public awareness of these issues is certainly rising, especially after the death and donation of organs by David Hookes, but we still have a long way to go," Dr Harding said.

The research found that more than half of Australians have never discussed their organ donation wishes with their extended family. Almost three-quarters are happy to leave the decision to their relatives following their death.

"Even if you are registered, sharing your decision with your extended family is as important as making the decision itself.

"Telling your family so they can honour your wishes will make them much more comfortable with the choice they have to make.

"A great way to remember is the 'TALK' to them, with 'TALK' being an acronym for Tell All Living Kin," Dr Harding continued.

The study shows that most Australians prefer to donate to, or receive organs from, relatives rather than strangers. Of the people surveyed, 20 percent would feel comfortable about receiving an organ from a stranger and only 12 percent would be comfortable about donating organs to a total stranger.

Other findings:

- Women are more likely than men to choose specific organs for donation.
- Australians are generally happy to donate major organs with kidneys being the most 'popular' and the least 'popular' being corneas.
- Three quarters of Australians would support lung transplants for ex-smokers, and liver transplants for reformed alcoholics. Surprisingly, about one third of Australians surveyed support lung transplants for current smokers and liver transplants for current alcoholics.

To assist with educating the public about organ donation, Transplant Australia has joined with Pfizer to produce this month's edition of the Pfizer Australia Health Report. Filled with useful information, free copies can be requested by phoning 1800 675 229 or by visiting www.healthreport.com.au where people can also sign-up for email alerts of future editions.

The findings on Australian attitudes and feelings towards organ and tissue transplants are based on responses from 1,487 people aged 16 and over. The research was conducted in May 2004 by independent consultants Stollznow Research.

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NB: INTERVIEWS WITH EXPERTS, TRANSPLANT RECIPIENTS AND DONORS ARE AVAILABLE IN EACH STATE.

For more information please contact Hausmann Communications:

Kylie Whetton on (02) 8353 5737 or 0413 061 122

Linda Reid on (02) 8353 5745 or 0417 800 996