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Database Expedites Organ Donation

Pioneering Harvard economists make it easier to match donors to patients

By Patrick S. Lahue, Contributing Writer

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An “optimized matching system,” similar to those used for making airline reservations or pairing online dating service users, is now being used to aid kidney transplants as a result of research by a team of Harvard economists.

In the past, if a donor wanted to give his organ to a family member—but could not due to conflicting blood types or antibodies—the donor’s information would not be saved by any organ transplant agency.

As a result, many potential donors were never matched with non-family members who needed kidneys.

Now, building on the work of Harvard economists, the New England Organ Bank has set up a database that facilitates kidney exchanges. For instance, if one type-A donor could not give his kidney to an ill type-B brother, and another type-B donor couldn’t give his kidney to an ill type-A sister, the two families might swap organs under the new system.

According to data from the United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS), there were 32 cases of this type of organ exchange in 2005, up from the first two reported cases in 2000.

However, new programs, such as the New England initiative and similar ones in Maryland and Ohio, could reduce the sporadic nature of these exchanges, making the process more efficient.

Currently there are 60,000 people on the waiting list for kidneys, and last year, 6,000 live donor transplants were conducted along with 8,000 cadaver donations, according to Gund Professor of Economics and Business Administration Alvin E. Roth, who created this program along with former Harvard Business School research fellows Tayfun Sonmez and M. Utku Unver.

Roth said that if this program were enacted nationally, he and his research team “anticipate another couple of thousand surgeries could be done” involving live donors instead of cadavers.

Richard Krafton, who received a kidney transplant just last week at the University’s Massachusetts General Hospital from a woman in Wisconsin through the exchange program, said he was back on his feet just a day after the surgery

In a phone interview from his Andover, Mass., home yesterday, he cited the need for the exchange to be made more public.

“No one is aware of this program. It needs to be publicized. This is a program that could help a lot of people,” he said.

The National Organ Transplant Act of 1984 bans donors from receiving any “valuable consideration” in exchange for their organ. UNOS has argued that organ exchanges are not prohibited under the act. Roth said that an amendment to the 1984 act might be needed to establish a nationwide exchange.

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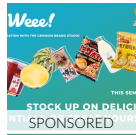
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