

Organs

Just over one in two Europeans would be prepared to donate an organ immediately after their death to help someone else according to a new pan-European survey conducted for the European Commission.

The results of the fieldwork, which involved over 26,000 people, revealed that 55 percent are happy to be donors, 27 percent were opposed and the remaining 18 percent had no views on the matter. The findings are broadly in line with those when the question was last asked three years earlier. However, there are significant differences across the 27-member European Union.

People in northern Europe are clearly sympathetic to the idea of donating their organs. The highest levels were recorded in Sweden (83 percent), Finland and Belgium (both 72 percent) and Denmark (70 percent). The one exception to the geographical trend was Malta (77 percent). In contrast, there is more reluctance in central and eastern Europe. In Latvia, the idea was rejected by 52 percent of those questioned, in Romania by 40 percent and in the Czech Republic (37 percent). Opposition was also high in Austria (41 percent said 'no') and Greece (38 percent against).

Almost one third (31 percent) of those unwilling to donate their own organs or those of a deceased close family member gave no reason for their reluctance. Of the remainder, a quarter are afraid of manipulation of the human body and one in five distrust the system. That distrust is particularly high in Greece (45 percent), the Czech Republic (33 percent), Slovakia (31 percent) and Italy (30 percent).

Education level and occupation appear to be two strong factors determining people's decisions. Those who had studied until they were 20 or older were far more likely to support organ donation (65 percent) than those who had left school at 15 or younger (45 percent). Similarly, people in managerial positions (68 percent) were more willing to be donors than the unemployed (49 percent).

The survey appeared just a month after the European Parliament overwhelmingly adopted draft legislation that will set uniform quality and safety standards for organ transplants across Europe and should shorten waiting times. The measures cover all stages of the chain from donation to the actual transplant.

Currently some 60,000 people are waiting for a transplant and a dozen die every day before they can be operated on. In addition, donor rates vary considerably, ranging from 34 per million in Spain – almost double the EU average of 18 – to 1.1 in Bulgaria. International cooperation already exists for transferring organs between countries, but is limited. The two exchange organisations: Eurotransplant (Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Slovenia) and Scandiatransplant (Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Iceland) cover only a limited number of EU countries. The new pan-European system, which should be in place within two years is designed to extend these exchanges. Each EU member state will designate a single authority to ensure quality and safety standards are met and to supervise exchanges between countries. They will also be responsible for putting in place traceability and management procedures to monitor any adverse reactions.

The European Parliament is also encouraging national authorities to implement an action plan for organ donations and transplants. This draws heavily on experience in Spain. The plan recommends every hospital establish a donor coordinator. It suggests exchange of best practice to raise the level of donations in countries where these are low. It also floats the idea of asking citizens to join a donor register when applying for official documents such as passports or driving licences and, in countries where they exist, to record their decision on identity cards.

Alongside its survey on organ donations, the European Commission's Eurobarometer service published findings into blood donors. This showed that donations are on the increase. Eight years ago, 31 percent of Europeans had given blood. Now, the figure has risen to 37 percent and is particularly high in Austria (66 percent), France (52 percent) and Greece (51 percent). At the other end of the scale came Portugal (22 percent), Italy (23 percent), Poland (25 percent), Malta (29 percent) and Sweden (30 percent).

The findings indicate that men (44 percent) are more likely to have given blood than females (31 percent) and that it is the 40 to 54 year age group (46 percent) that has made the most donations. Again, people in managerial positions (49 percent) and the self-employed (44 percent) are more prepared to donate than students (19 percent), the unemployed (33 percent) or those who do not work, but remain at home (25 percent). At the same time, a clear majority (57 percent) believe that blood transfusions are safer now than they were ten years ago.

Rory Watson

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