

Organ Trafficking in Eastern Europe

By Sam Vaknin

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A kidney fetches \$2700 in Turkey. According to last month's issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association, this is a high price. An Indian or Iraqi kidney enriches its former owner by a mere \$1000. Wealthy clients later pay for the rare organ up to \$150,000.

CBS News aired, two years ago, a documentary, filmed by Antenna 3 of Spain, in which undercover reporters in Mexico were asked, by a priest acting as a middleman for a doctor, to pay close to 1 million dollars for a single kidney. An auction of a human kidney on eBay in February 2000 drew a bid of \$100,000 before the company put a stop to it. Another auction in September 1999 drew \$5.7 million - though, probably, merely as a prank.

Organ harvesting operations flourish in Turkey, in central Europe, mainly in the Czech Republic, and in the Caucasus, mainly in Georgia. They operate on Turkish, Moldovan, Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Romanian, Bosnian, Kosovar, Macedonian, Albanian and assorted east European donors.

They remove kidneys, lungs, pieces of liver, even corneas, bones, tendons, heart valves, skin and other sellable human bits. The organs are kept in cold storage and air lifted to illegal distribution centers in the United States, Germany, Scandinavia, the United Kingdom, Israel, South Africa, and other rich, industrialized locales. It gives "brain drain" a new, spine chilling, meaning.

Organ trafficking has become an international trade. It involves Indian, Thai, Philippine, Brazilian, Turkish and Israeli doctors who scour the Balkan and other destitute regions for tissues. The Washington Post reported last week that in a single village in Moldova, 14 out of 40 men were reduced by penury to selling body parts.

Last year, Moldova cut off the thriving baby adoption trade due to an - an unfounded - fear the toddlers were being dissected for spare organs. According to the Israeli daily, Ha'aretz, the Romanians are investigating similar allegations in Israel and have withheld permission to adopt Romanian babies from dozens of eager and out of pocket couples. American authorities are scrutinizing a two year old Moldovan harvesting operation based in the United States.

Organ theft and trading in Ukraine is a smooth operation. According to news agencies,

last August three Ukrainian doctors were charged in Lvov with trafficking in the organs of victims of road accidents. The doctors used helicopters to ferry kidneys and livers to colluding hospitals. They charged up to \$19,000 per organ.

The West Australian daily surveyed in January the thriving organs business in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Sellers are offering their wares openly, through newspaper ads. Prices reach up to \$68,000. Compared to an average monthly wage of less than \$200, this is an unimaginable fortune.

National health insurance schemes turn a blind eye. Israel's participates in the costs of purchasing organs abroad, though only subject to rigorous vetting of the sources of the donation. Still, a May 2001 article in the New York Times Magazine, quotes "the coordinator of kidney transplantation at Hadassah University Hospital in Jerusalem (as saying that) 60 of the 244 patients currently receiving post-transplant care purchased their new kidney from a stranger - just short of 25 percent of the patients at one of Israel's largest medical centers participating in the organ business".

Many Israelis - attempting to avoid scrutiny - travel to east Europe, accompanied by Israeli doctors, to perform the transplantation surgery. These junkets are euphemistically known as "transplant tourism". Clinics have sprouted all over the benighted region. Israeli doctors have recently visited impoverished Macedonia, Bulgaria, Kosovo and Yugoslavia to discuss with local businessmen and doctors the setting up of kidney transplant clinics.

Such open involvement in what can be charitably described as a latter day slave trade gives rise to a new wave of thinly disguised anti-Semitism. The Ukrainian Echo, quoting the Ukrinform news agency, reported, on January 7, that, implausibly, a Ukrainian guest worker died in Tel-Aviv in mysterious circumstances and his heart was removed. The Interpol, according to the paper, is investigating this lurid affair.

According to scholars, reports of organ thefts and related abductions, mainly of children, have been rife in Poland and Russia at least since 1991. The buyers are supposed to be rich Arabs.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes, an anthropologist at the University of California at Berkeley and co-founder of Organs Watch, a research and documentation center, is also a member and co-author of the Bellagio Task Force Report on Transplantation, Bodily Integrity and the International Traffic in Organs. In a report presented in June 2001 to the House Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights, she substantiated at least the nationality of the alleged buyers, though not the urban legends regarding organ theft:

"In the Middle East residents of the Gulf States (Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Oman) have for many years traveled to India, the Philippines, and to Eastern Europe to purchase kidneys made scarce locally due to local fundamentalist Islamic teachings that allow organ transplantation (to save a life), but prohibit organ harvesting from brain-dead bodies.

Meanwhile, hundreds of kidney patients from Israel, which has its own well-developed,

but under-used transplantation centers (due to ultra-orthodox Jewish reservations about brain death) travel in 'transplant tourist' junkets to Turkey, Moldova, Romania where desperate kidney sellers can be found, and to Russia where an excess of lucrative cadaveric organs are produced due to lax standards for designating brain death, and to South Africa where the amenities in transplantation clinics in private hospitals can resemble four star hotels.

We found in many countries - from Brazil and Argentina to India, Russia, Romania, Turkey to South Africa and parts of the United States - a kind of 'apartheid medicine' that divides the world into two distinctly different populations of 'organs suppliers' and 'organs receivers'."

Russia, together with Estonia, China and Iraq, is, indeed, a major harvesting and trading centre. International news agencies described, two years ago, how a grandmother in Ryazan tried to sell her grandchild to a mediator. The boy was to be smuggled to the West and there dismembered for his organs. The uncle, who assisted in the matter, was supposed to collect \$70,000 - a fortune in Russian terms.

When confronted by the European Union on this issue, Russia responded that it lacks the resources required to monitor organ donations. The Italian magazine, Happy Web, reports that organ trading has taken to the Internet. A simple query on the Google search engine yields thousands of Web sites purporting to sell various body parts - mostly kidneys - for up to \$125,000. The sellers are Russian, Moldovan, Ukrainian and Romanian.

Scheper-Hughes, an avid opponent of legalizing any form of trade in organs, says that "in general, the movement and flow of living donor organs - mostly kidneys - is from South to North, from poor to rich, from black and brown to white, and from female to male bodies".

Yet, this summer, bowing to reality, the American Medical Association commissioned a study to examine the effects of paying for cadaveric organs would have on the current shortage. The 1984 National Organ Transplant Act that forbids such payments is also under attack. Bills to amend it were submitted recently by several Congressmen. These are steps in the right direction.

Organ trafficking is the outcome of the international ban on organ sales and live donor organs. But wherever there is demand there is a market. Excruciating poverty of potential donors, lengthening patient waiting lists and the better quality of organs harvested from live people make organ sales an irresistible proposition. The medical professions and authorities everywhere would do better to legalize and regulate the trade rather than transform it into a form of organized crime. The denizens of Moldova would surely appreciate it.

When Does The Donation Process Begin?

By News Canada

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(NC)-The surgery can begin after two doctors, not involved in the transplantation procedure, have declared the patient to be brain-dead. If and when the family agrees to donate the organs and tissues of their loved ones, the transplantation team arrives to harvest them.

If I have registered my consent for organ donation, will everything be done to save my life if I'm severely injured?

Absolutely. Organ donation is, first and foremost, about saving lives. Potential organ donors must be declared brain dead by two impartial doctors who work separately from the transplant team. Transplant doctors are not involved with the patient until lifesaving attempts have failed, brain death has been declared, and consent for organ donation has been confirmed.

A person is brain dead when all the functions of the brain stop working. Less than 1% of all deaths in Canada result in the potential for organ donation.

What is the success rate for transplantation of organs?

Success rates for transplants vary depending on the organ, but in general 85-95% of transplants are successful one year after surgery.

For more information on organ and tissue donation and how you can donate, visit www.healthcanada.ca/organandtissue on the Internet.

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