

STAGE 1 DEBATE: TRANSPLANTATION (AUTHORISATION OF REMOVAL OF ORGANS ETC.) (SCOTLAND) BILL

RCN Position

At this time, RCN Scotland does not favour a legislative change to an opt-out system for organ or tissue donation. RCN Scotland continues to support the NHS Blood and Transplant's focus on 'changing public behaviour with regard to organ donation' and 'maximising conversion of potential donors into actual donors' by means other than adoption of an opt-out approach to consent.

Background

On 24th July 2009, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) Council was asked to consider the College position on organ donation. The results of the RCN member consultation held earlier that year were presented to assist the RCN Council in considering the College position.

At this meeting Council agreed to support the retention of the current opt-in system and closely monitor implementation of the Organ Donation Taskforce Report recommendations and consequently consider if there was a need to change the RCN's position in light of progress.

The role of nurses in organ donation

Nurses can be the first clinicians to broach the difficult subject of organ/tissue donation with relatives of potential donors. When patients become critically ill and consideration is being given to whether they will be suitable for organ donation, nurses play a central role in the assessment to establish their suitability. Nurses also play a central role in ensuring that the end-of-life care conforms to what are known to be, or what can reasonably be assumed to be, the expectations of the patient. In our 2009 consultation, some concerns were expressed by members that public trust in nurses' ability to fulfil this role could be undermined by adoption of an opt-out system of donor registration.

The thought was that a perception of a conflict of interests may arise, whereby the nurse's role in caring for the dying patient may be regarded as secondary to the nurse's role in facilitating the retrieval of organs for transplantation.

To minimise the possibility of such a misconception of the role of the nurse, and to improve public understanding of organ donation, RCN Scotland would strongly encourage the Scottish Government to make explicit the principle that organ and tissue donation should be integrated into the culture of best practice in end of life care. We believe that this will have a substantially beneficial impact on donation rates.

Nurses have consistently highlighted the benefits of an open and honest process in encouraging donation, as well as increased support for relatives at the end of life. It is understandable that the needs of recipients of organs are usually emphasised in discussions about donation ethics and policy. We suggest, however, that it is equally important for willing potential donors that a culture should continue to evolve in which donation is recognised as an important element of person-centred end of life care.

Further information sources

If you would like any further information please contact Sarah Atherton, Parliamentary and Media Officer, by email at sarah.atherton@rcn.org.uk or by telephone 0131 662 6172.