

Too poor to be a living kidney donor

I watched my friend Maurie Ferriter die on the waiting list for an organ donation. I was more than willing to donate a kidney to him, and I was a perfect medical match, but I didn't have enough money. By law, Maurie couldn't give me the financial help I needed to take the time off to make the donation, and that effectively condemned him to death.

You may be surprised to learn that 20 to 30 Americans now die every day because they need a kidney transplant and can't find a donor. The National Organ Transplant Act, which turns 30 next year, forbids recipients, charities, the government anyone from covering most of the expenses an organ donor necessarily incurs to give life to another.

The No. 1 argument against allowing payment for kidneys is that it would exploit the poor. Yet, that's hardly the only option. The government could create a regulated system, ensuring that donors gave their informed consent, and compensating them directly for their sacrifices.

Such a reform would save lives, money and incalculable suffering.

In Maurie's case, though I passed all my medical and psychological tests and was fully prepared to donate a kidney, the living donor coordination team rejected me on the grounds that I lacked a strong enough "support network." In other words, neither my family nor I had enough free time or money to finance my donation out of our own pockets.

Under the current system, donors don't pay for pre-transplant testing, or any of the medical costs associated with the actual operation, but they do incur other related costs, including travel expenses and wages lost while they recover from surgery.

Maurie would have been happy to help me pay for childcare or hire a hand to do the heavy lifting on my family's small Virginia farm while I recovered, but by law, that would constitute buying a kidney, for which either or both of us could have faced five years in jail, or a \$50,000 fine.

The irony could scarcely be thicker: At a time when we jail so many non-violent offenders that overcrowding in prisons increasingly forces us to allow murderers back on the streets, we might also jail people for saving their friends' lives.

In almost three decades under the Transplantation Act, the United

COMMUNITY VIEW SIGRID FRY-REVERE



States has prevented thousands of people from finding donors before they died, but only ever convicted one man of organ trafficking: Levy Lzhak Rosenbaum, an Israeli living in Brooklyn. In July 2012, the government sentenced Rosenbaum to 2.5 years in prison for buying poor Israelis' kidneys for as little as \$10,000 and selling them to desperate Americans for over \$100,000 each.

In a system that demands altruistic donation, almost all donors are friends and family members of their recipients. So where does that leave people whose friends can't afford to take weeks or even months off work?

In plain English, the Transplant Act enables the wealthy to get living organ donations for free, and self-employed and blue-collar workers to die of organ failure.

A few government programs help donors cover costs, but not surprisingly, they mostly favor the people who already have the easiest access to free kidneys.

Under the Transplant Act, organ recipients are allowed to reimburse donors' quantifiable lost wages, but the government doesn't help them, limiting the benefits largely to those wealthy enough to do so. And donors must also show proof of lost wages, meaning small business owners, contractors, homemakers, farmers and the unemployed do not qualify for reimbursement.

A few states allow donors to deduct donation-related expenses from their income taxes, but that also doesn't help the unemployed or people who don't have enough cash to pay the costs of transplantation upfront.

In my case, I'm a homemaker, a volunteer CEO for a nonprofit and an owner of a small farm, so I don't have a quantifiable income. But my husband makes more

than 300 percent below the poverty line, so I didn't qualify for the miniscule amount of aid provided under a 2004 revision to the 1984 Transplant Act. The government told me I had too much money to get federal assistance for donating an organ, and too little to actually do it.

The net result is that many Americans suffer needlessly on dialysis, which cleans only 10 percent of the toxins a healthy kidney would remove from the blood. Dialysis patients, who usually undergo treatment three days a week, for three to four hours at a time, are constantly tired. They are often in and out hospitals with complications, and they rarely hold down a job past their first year of treatment.

On average, Americans live only four years on dialysis, because their bodies deteriorate as their own wastes poison them to death.

Meanwhile, the average lifespan of people who get transplants before going on dialysis is more than twice as long, and transplant patients can usually resume their normal lives after surgery.

In 2010, the average Medicare cost for transplant patients – that is, the cost of the operation, post-operative care, maintenance medications and surgical removal if the transplant failed – was \$32,914.

The same year, Medicare's average cost for dialysis patients was \$77,156 – not including coverage for common complications, such as diabetes and heart disease. When these treatment costs are factored in, estimates are closer to \$375,000.

In 2010, Medicare spent over \$29 billion caring for patients with End Stage Renal Disease.

The price tag might not be so shocking if we weren't spending so much on the least satisfactory solution.

At a time when Americans understandably worry about the government's ability to get anything right in healthcare, kidney disease is that rare problem we could actually solve without going to great lengths or expense.

Most people will never need kidney donations. Those who do can't afford to wait. And they would be far less likely to wait themselves to death if we compensated the donors who save their lives.

The alternative is a self-imposed tragedy, an ongoing shame that steals our friends from us, day after day, year after year.

SIGRID FRY-REVERE
Lovettsville



A veteran seeks a kidney transplant from a street corner.