The disturbing reason behind the spike in organ donations

By Cleve R. Wootson Jr.  April 17 at 2:33 PM

It does not take an in-depth reading of the letters that recipients of organ transplants write to the families of deceased donors to realize the deep connection between an ailing person’s salvation and another family’s grief.

A study has added a new wrinkle to this already emotional issue of life and death: A rise in organ transplants is linked to a similar rise in drug overdose deaths across the nation.

In 2016, there were 3,533 transplants using organs donated from overdose victims, compared with 149 such transplants in 2000, the study found. Overdose victims made up 1.1 percent of all donors in 2000. In 2017, they made up 13.4 percent.

It is contributing to a spike in total organ transplants. According to the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network, a “record number of donor organs were recovered and transplants occurred for each of the four most common organs transplanted — kidney, liver, heart and lung” — in 2017.

Although the organs are from people who had risky lifestyles, people who receive such transplants do not appear to have more negative effects over time.

That is decidedly good news to the more than 114,000 people who the United Network for Organ Sharing estimates were awaiting transplants Tuesday afternoon — though researchers concede it comes with an asterisk.

“This is not an ideal or sustainable solution to the organ shortage,” lead researcher Christine Durand wrote in the journal Annals of Internal Medicine.

Since 2000, the opioid epidemic has killed 200,000 people in the United States, according to The Washington Post’s Katie Zezima and Scott Higham. That is more than three times the number of U.S. military deaths in the Vietnam War.

Amid the deaths are countless tableaus of heartbreak: a 7-year-old who tried for more than a day to wake her parents before
The disturbing reason behind the spike in organ donations - The W... authorities discovered the gruesome reason; a toddler in pink pajamas caught on video crying and pulling her unconscious mother, who had collapsed in the toy aisle; a 10-year-old who died with a dangerous mix of opioids in his system.

Equally tragic, Durand told CNN, are the people who die while on the waiting list for an organ.

“The current epidemic of deaths from overdose is a tragedy. It would also be tragic to continue to underutilize lifesaving transplants from donors,” she said. “We have an obligation to optimize the use of all organs donated. The donors, families and patients waiting deserve our best effort to use every gift of life we can.”

The researchers used data from the Scientific Registry of Transplant Recipients, which gives details on many aspects of the transplant system.

They were able to identify more than 7,313 donors who had died from drug overdoses, resulting in nearly 20,000 transplants, CNN reported. From 2000 to 2017, the number of overdose-death donors increased by 17 percent every year. In comparison, donations from people who had died in traumatic injuries increased by 1.6 percent.

The researchers also credited screening tests with ensuring recipients were protected from dangerous outcomes, like contracting hepatitis C from a donated organ.

The researchers said recovered kidneys, for example, were discarded at a significantly higher rate from overdose donors than others, in part because of a higher incidence of hepatitis C.

“Screening tests have improved dramatically since the late 1990s,” Durand told Live Science. “Testing practices include not only antibody tests for the infections, but what we call nucleic acid tests — testing for the virus in the blood — so that we would catch even donors that had been recently infected.”

In some cases, those who received organs from people in high-risk groups fared better. Overdoses were more likely to be younger and not suffer from ailments such as hypertension, diabetes or heart attack.

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