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ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

## Guest opinion: Why won't UNOS reduce the organ shortage?

DAVID J. UNDIS

The waiting list for organ transplants in the United States soon will hit 100,000 people. Most of these people will never receive a transplant. They will die waiting for one.

About 6,000 of them will die waiting this year. This is tragic. It is also unnecessary.

The United Network for Organ Sharing, which manages the national organ allocation system, has the power to implement a simple policy change that would save thousands of lives every year.



UNOS identified this policy change 12 years ago, but it has taken no steps to implement it.

What is this life-saving policy change? UNOS should allocate organs first to people who have agreed to donate their own organs when they die. This would cause a dramatic increase in organ donation rates.

But instead of giving organ donors a break, UNOS gives them the shaft.

UNOS treats registered organ donors no better than people who are prepared to bury their organs rather than save their neighbors' lives. About 50 percent of the organs allocated by UNOS go to people who are not registered organ donors.

In 1993, the UNOS Ethics Committee published a white paper titled "Preferred Status For Organ Donors."

It said "preferred status has the potential to maximize fairness" in the organ allocation system. It said "it would be hoped that many who had not found it important to consider the issue of organ donation would be encouraged to think about it and agree to participate, thereby eventually increasing the number of registered organ donors substantially."

It discussed potential problems with the idea, but concluded by recommending "wider societal discussion before considering concrete plans for implementation."

It also noted that "a trial could be implemented without requiring any alteration in existing legislation."

So why hasn't UNOS implemented preferred status for organ donors? We don't know.

We do know that UNOS hasn't led the discussion it recommended or implemented a trial.

We also know that more than 70,000 people on UNOS' transplant waiting list have died since UNOS issued its white paper in 1993.

Many of those people would still be alive today if UNOS had acted.

At LifeSharers, we're trying to fill the void left by UNOS' inaction. We've implemented a grass-roots preferred status system.

If you want to donate your organs to other organ donors, and increase your chances of getting a transplant if you ever need one, please join us at [www.lifesharers.org](http://www.lifesharers.org). Membership is free and open to all. If you don't have internet access, you can get an enrollment form by calling us toll-free at 1-888-ORGAN88.

LifeSharers has recruited more than 10,000 organ donors to date, which is a good start, but we'll never be able to reduce the organ shortage as fast as UNOS could.

Implementation by UNOS of preferred status for organ donors would mean life and health instead of suffering and death for tens of thousands of the people now on its transplant waiting list.

Those people are dying at the rate of more than 18 every day, so UNOS should act promptly.

The UNOS transplant waiting list has doubled in the last 10 years. How big does the list have to get for UNOS to act? How many more have to die? Why won't UNOS reduce the organ shortage?

David J. Undis is executive director of [LifeSharers](http://LifeSharers.org). E-mail: [daveundis@lifesharers.org](mailto:daveundis@lifesharers.org).

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1. Comment by Harold K. (hkyriazi) — December 5, 2007 @ 1:24PM

I applaud Mr. Undis's noble efforts, and have already signed up with his LifeSharers program. I'd like to point out that if UNOS were to implement preferred status for organ donors, they'd have to make sure people had to have registered BEFORE they find out they need organs, otherwise no additional people will feel the need to sign up as donors, unless and until they need organs themselves. I assume this was one of the "potential problems" UNOS discussed 12 years ago.

Another option would be for health insurance companies to be allowed to offer funeral benefits and other types of thank-yous to the families of deceased, potential organ donors. That would require an act of Congress, however, and we all know how that tune goes. (Congress occasionally does the right thing, but rarely for the right reason.)



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