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From The Sunday Times

July 15, 2007

## Doctors: we must all donate organs

Sarah-Kate Templeton, Health Editor

THE chief medical officer wants everyone to be treated as organ donors after death unless they explicitly opt out of the scheme.

Sir Liam Donaldson believes the shortage of kidneys, livers and hearts is so acute that the country needs a donation system that will presume patients have given consent for their body parts to be transplanted.

Those who wanted to opt out would have to register in a similar way to those who now carry organ donor cards. This could be done through a central NHS database or through other documentation, such as driving licences.

Such a fundamental change is likely to prove controversial as critics claim it gives the state new powers over people's bodies. However, supporters of the change point out that hundreds of people die each year because of shortages of organs. More than 7,300 Britons are on the waiting list for a life-saving organ, a rise of about 30% over the past decade.

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Donaldson is expected to call for a change in the law when he publishes his annual report on the nation's health on Tuesday. He has the backing of the medical profession. The British Medical Association (BMA) is already campaigning for presumed consent to be the default position.

A recent BMA report entitled Presumed consent for organ donation, states: "Each year, many people die waiting for organ transplant. At the same time, bodies are buried or cremated complete with organs that could have been used to save lives, not because the deceased objected to organ donation but simply because they never got round to signing up to the NHS Organ Donor Register or informing their relatives of their wishes."

Surveys have shown that about 90% of Britons are willing to donate organs after their death, but only 14.5m, 23% of the population, are on the Organ Donor Register.

Donaldson, like the BMA, is expected to favour a "soft" opt-out that takes family members' views into account. The BMA proposes that family members should be informed if a relative has not stated an objection to donation and be asked if they have any strong opposition.

The donation would go ahead unless families were aware of an unregistered objection, or if they would suffer extreme distress from the removal of a relative's organs.

Other countries in the European Union have introduced presumed consent, leading to a large increase in the number of organs available for transplant. Belgium passed a "soft" presumed consent law in 1986 and has almost doubled the number of organs available. Belgians can register their objection at their town hall but only about 2% have done so.

Spain, widely credited with the most successful system, has operated a "soft" scheme since 1989. Its success in raising donation rates has been partly attributed, however, to its national



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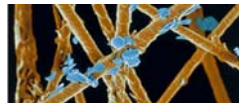
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Answers to your kidney

Dr Vivian Nathanson, the BMA's head of science and ethics, believes British public opinion is coming round to an opt-out system. "We are now getting closer to a system of presumed consent," she said. "We have exhausted all other ways of increasing the number of organs available but people are still dying on the waiting list, and that is making us more courageous."

In 2005, a BBC survey of more than 2,000 people found that 60% supported a shift to presumed consent. However, opponents say presumed consent should not be introduced because the public do not fully understand what is involved in organ donation.

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#### HAVE YOUR SAY

Thanks to my donor, my young son still has a mummy, my husband is not a widower, and my brother still has his beloved little sister in his life. You may not want to leave your organs to 'strangers' that's up to you, but please take a few moments to contemplate planning your own funeral at 33 years old, writing goodbye letters to those you love, sobbing as you hold your baby, knowing that without the amazing people who choose to let organs be used after their death, you will not live to see their next birthday. You might need a life saving transplant one day. Worse still, your son or daughter/husband or wife might. It's all very well to say that if people are ill then let them die. I am 37 now, and although I have an illness, I work and pay my taxes. I'm a mum and a wife. Please don't let me die if I need another transplant, I have too much to live for.

A, Suffolk.,

At last, a sensible proposal to save thousands of lives. It will be too late for my relative, who has been waiting for a transplant for 5 years and is now too ill to have one as he has become too weak to stand an operation. It's a scandal that organs that could save lives are being buried or burnt. If this had been proposed five years ago my relative might have a long healthy life ahead of him, instead he's had five years of suffering.

brokenhearted, Liverpool,

So have all of you who want to be asked - have you signed up yet? I am asking you now. I spent 3 years on dialysis waiting for a call and didnt get one. 3 months ago my half brother gave me one of his kidneys. It has transformed my life. He had the courage to be a living donor. Do you have the courage to leave a lasting and precious legacy by signing onto [www.uktransplant.org.uk](http://www.uktransplant.org.uk). There were only 780 deceased donors last year. Yet so many more patients could be helped if organs were donated. We have been begging for our lives which are in the hands of people who dont get around to declaring their wishes and signing up. So many of us have died waiting. A "soft" presumed consent as described by the CMO is one route forward.

Helen R, London, UK

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