

TV news on organ donation says little about need, how to become a donor

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More than 100,000 people in the U.S. are waiting for an organ transplant, and an average of 17 die waiting each day, according to University of Illinois communication professor Brian Quick.

But you'll rarely hear those facts in [organ donation](#) stories on TV network news, says Quick, the lead author of a study published this month in the journal *Health Communication*.

You'll also rarely hear about the simple steps required to become a potential donor, he said.

"We found that the networks didn't spend a whole lot of time talking about the need, and they didn't spend a lot of time talking about how to register," Quick said.

Quick and his co-authors on the study drew from ABC, CBS and NBC news transcripts that were available through the LexisNexis media database, covering the period 1990 to 2005. The transcripts came from dozens of different news programs, including morning, evening and magazine shows.

(NBC transcripts were not available from LexisNexis for broadcasts before 1995, and Quick said it was difficult to know what programs or specific broadcasts from any of the three networks might have transcripts missing from the database.)

Three students were trained as research coders to analyze the organ donation stories, once they were identified.

Over the period studied, the researchers found 1,507 stories involving organ donation, or about 100 a year, a number they labeled as "modest coverage."

Of the 201 stories that mentioned health outcomes for living organ donors, 189 (or 94 percent) were positive, compared with 12 stories about unsuccessful donor outcomes. Of the 755 stories that mentioned health outcomes for organ recipients, 617 (81.7 percent) were positive, compared to 138 about negative outcomes.

Less than 15 percent of all stories, however, noted the large number of people waiting for an organ, and most illustrated that need through narrative rather than statistics, Quick said. Less than 5 percent of stories specified the number of individuals who die waiting for an organ transplant.

Also, less than 10 percent of stories indicated how to become a potential donor: by signing a donor card, talking to one's family, signing the back of a driver's license, or registering through a Web site.

These numbers are a concern, Quick said, because "you've got to communicate the need before people are going to be motivated to become potential donors, and then they have to know how."

Quick said he was motivated to research the topic - and sign up early as a potential donor himself - based in large part on his own experience. "I've been on the receiving end twice," he said, since his father has received transplants of both a kidney and pancreas, the first coming while Quick was still in high school.

Even though he's experienced the benefits, however, he understands why many are hesitant to discuss the topic with family or to register as potential donors. To sign up as a potential donor means contemplating your own death, as well as concerns about disfigurement, he said.

The results of the TV news study have implications for those advocating organ donation and designing campaigns to promote it, Quick said.

The results are especially important, he said, because research suggests that TV is the primary source of information about organ donation. Research also shows that entertainment programs, such as medical shows in search of a compelling storyline, often reinforce common "fears and myths" about organ donation, he said.

"The news has a good opportunity to communicate the facts," Quick said. "We need to continue to reinforce the positive because we are competing with Hollywood, which is really tough."

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign ([news](#) : [web](#))

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