

Most patients are willing to donate eyes to research, but few do

July 12 2013, by Alex Barhorst

Far more people are willing to donate their eyes to research than actually are registered to donate, according to a study led by a Michigan State University student.

While demand for tissue remains high, the number of [human eyes](#) donated for research declined 28 percent between 1997 and 2004, said Andrew Williams, a third-year MSU College of Human Medicine student who led the study in the journal *Current Eye Research*.

"A lot of people aren't aware they can donate their eyes to research," Williams said. "They don't really know how to get the process started. It comes down to a lack of education."

Of roughly 200 patients with eye diseases surveyed in the study, 90 percent said they were willing to donate their eyes.

Among patients who were not registered to donate, 77 percent gave what the researchers called non-prohibitive reasons. For example, many patients said they weren't registered because they'd never been asked. Other patients believed their eyes were too diseased to donate, when in fact diseased eyes are particularly useful for research.

In some states, being an eye donor is separate from being an [organ donor](#). Williams said he does not think many people notice a separate box may need to be checked specifically for eye donation. Among people who do donate their eyes, few designate them for research.

"The donation process is too complex," Williams said. "It could be structured better to facilitate donations."

Williams said states could simplify the donation process by providing people with more information and flagging patients who express interest in offering their eyes.

However, [doctors](#) are hesitant to ask afflicted patients to donate eyes.

"We were concerned about the doctor-patient relationship," Williams said, "but our thought was that it seems reasonable to have a [pamphlet](#) in the [waiting room](#)."

In the study, 41 percent of surveyed patients preferred learning about eye donation from their doctor, while 37 percent said they would prefer to learn from a pamphlet.

Patients also said they were more likely to consider donating if they had strong trust in their eye doctor.

Williams and his team have held meetings with Donate Life, a nonprofit organization responsible for increasing [donations](#), to implement a simpler system for donating eyes.

"Eye donation has restored sight to thousands of patients," Williams said. "If we were able to streamline the process, researchers could work much more efficiently."

Provided by Michigan State University

Citation: Most patients are willing to donate eyes to research, but few do (2013, July 12)
retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-07-patients-donate-eyes.html>

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