

Emotional radio ads may ease listeners' qualms, boosting support for organ donation

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Radio ads with an emotional appeal—featuring personal stories of either a happy organ transplant recipient or a sad patient languishing on the waiting list—increase non-donor listeners' support for organ donation and may be effective at overcoming some of the qualms that deter them from joining the donor registry, a new study suggests.

The research is [published](#) in the *Journal of Health Communication*.

More than 570 African American, Hispanic and white adults who were not registered organ donors listened to either a 60-second radio ad with a young mother expressing her joy about having received a [heart transplant](#) or an ad that evoked sadness, featuring a young mother who was on the waiting list for a double-lung transplant and worried that it might not happen in time to save her life due to an organ shortage.

While poignant messages that sparked happiness or sadness were influential on many listeners, the effects differed dramatically, the researchers found.

"Happiness was positively associated with greater ad persuasiveness in 75% of our models, whereas sadness enhanced ad persuasiveness in 50% of them," said communication professor Brian Quick of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, who cowrote the study with James Madison University communication studies professor Tobias Reynolds-Tylus and U. of I. graduate students Minhey Chung and Ethan Morrow.

Before hearing one of the messages, the study participants were surveyed to determine whether they harbored any of four common beliefs that deter people from signing up on the organ donor registry. Some non-donors were concerned about bodily integrity, believing that their bodies needed to remain intact after they died so they could enjoy the afterlife, while others were superstitious that joining the registry would be a jinx, causing them to die prematurely.

Accordingly, people who mistrust the medical establishment harbor doubts that physicians will prioritize their well-being as a patient, choosing to let them die to procure their organs instead.

And there's another concerning factor: Some people are repelled by

thoughts about the medical procedures that may be done to their bodies to remove organs after their death, said Quick, who has conducted several research projects that explored donor-recruitment messaging strategies and differing beliefs and barriers among societal groups.

Practitioners struggle to identify messaging strategies that will overcome the psychological barriers identified in the current study and be effective in recruiting more people to become registered donors, Quick said. Registration rates for organ donation are particularly low among African Americans and Hispanics, according to the United Network for Organ Sharing.

Currently, more than 103,000 individuals are on the national transplant waiting list for an organ transplant, and 17 individuals die every day due to the shortage of available organs, according to data from UNOS.

In the U.S., African Americans and Hispanics are disproportionately represented on the transplant waiting list. While African Americans account for 12% of the U.S. population, they comprise about 29% of the waiting list candidates. Similarly, Hispanics, who represent more than 18% of the nation's population, account for 21% of the waiting list candidates, according to population data from the U.S. Census Bureau and waiting list data from the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network.

"We found that feelings of happiness were associated with greater ad persuasiveness, particularly among non-donors who had higher levels of medical mistrust," Quick said. "This finding is important for future message design. Appeals using happiness to highlight recipients' lives being saved and significantly improved following transplantation should be prioritized in future donor-recruitment campaigns."

When non-donor listeners were more fearful about being jinxed if they

became registered donors or if they had higher levels of medical mistrust, the ad that evoked feelings of sadness was more persuasive, the team found.

But sadness did not increase ad persuasiveness among those who viewed organ donation as unpleasant or who were concerned about maintaining bodily integrity after death, the data indicated.

Although tugging on people's heartstrings with the personal story of the young mother on the waiting list who was at risk of dying without a double-lung transplant swayed many listeners, the team cautioned campaign designers to "tread cautiously" with evocative messages that use "powerful sadness" to promote organ donation, "lest the (ads) be perceived as being overtly manipulative."

"Our results point to some clear message recommendations for those working to boost organ donor registration," Quick said. "That is, when reaching a mistrustful audience, depicting stories of organ recipients will likely elicit feelings of happiness, which in turn will increase ad persuasiveness among this skeptical audience. Together, we hope this knowledge can be used to improve campaigns designed to educate the public about [organ donation](#)."

More information: Brian L. Quick et al, Can Happiness and Sadness Overcome Organ Donation Barriers Following Exposure to Radio Ads?, *Journal of Health Communication* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/10810730.2024.2313988](#)

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