

Experts urge US to change organ donation policies

November 12 2014, by Kerry Sheridan

A group of more than 300 prominent doctors, religious leaders and ethicists on Wednesday urged President Barack Obama to change the current system for organ donation, saying too few people get life-saving transplants.

In an open letter to the Obama administration, the group called for the government to start researching ways to make [organ donation](#) more appealing to the general public, in order to end a chronic shortage of organs that is getting worse each year.

"Sadly, transplant policy has been governed by an unsubstantiated assumption: that donors cannot receive benefits for donating without being exploited or coerced," said the letter signed by experts at Harvard, Columbia, Georgetown and Princeton universities along with scholars, [religious leaders](#) and ethicists.

"It is critical to examine that assumption."

The group does not take a position on what kind of approach might work, and only asks that US agencies like the National Institutes for Health and Health and Human Services start scientific studies on the matter.

It suggests that the government avoid cash incentives, but pursue a highly regulated approach that considers how to give people benefits for offering to be a living donor, such as life-long health insurance, tax

credits, tuition assistance or pension contributions.

For those who donate after death, researchers should look into the possibility of paying funeral costs or making charitable donations in their names, it said.

"Giving an organ need not fall disproportionately on people with lower incomes," the letter said.

Current US policy prohibits people who give an organ from receiving anything for their donation.

However, women are routinely paid for donating their eggs or for serving as surrogate mothers.

When it comes to kidneys, the US shortage has ballooned in recent years. In 2009, 77,000 people were on the waiting list; more than 100,000 are today.

About 17,000 kidney transplants are performed annually. Each year, some 7,000 people die or become too sick to receive a transplant.

The problem disproportionately affects minorities such as African Americans and Hispanics, who typically wait four to five times as long for a transplant as whites do.

"The current system is the system that discriminates against poor people," said Frances Kissling, president of the Center for Health, Ethics and Social Policy in Washington, and the former leader of Catholics for Choice.

"We don't help those people by closing our eyes to the ethical problems that exist. We need to solve the [ethical problems](#)," she told AFP.

Experts say any change must avoid fueling the organ trafficking trade, which the World Health Organization says is responsible for about 10 percent of global [organ transplants](#) each year.

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