Government Should Provide Health Insurance as Incentive to Organ Donors

John P. Roberts

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Presently in the United States there is a long list of patients waiting to receive a kidney transplant. And while waiting, these patients often require dialysis treatment, which is covered by Medicare at great expense to taxpayers. If the government would set up a program that offers lifetime medical coverage to living kidney donors, more people might choose to donate. The resulting increase in donated kidneys would lead to a decrease in Medicare expenses. Such a federally funded incentive program would be of great benefit to the American people and is supported by numerous medical organizations as well as the Declaration of Istanbul on Organ Trafficking and Transplant Tourism.

The ASTS [American Society of Transplant Surgeons] would like to see a bill introduced in Congress that would provide lifetime Medicare coverage for living donors. The transplant community would support this provision of insur-
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In a recent poll of our membership, more than 60% of our members would support provision of health insurance to live donors. The American Society of Transplantation’s position paper on living donation clearly supports creation of federally funded insurance programs for donors. The Istanbul document [The Declaration of Istanbul on Organ Trafficking and Transplant Tourism] supports health insurance for donors.

The provision of Medicare will also solve the issue of tracking the outcome of donors in the long term.

More Organ Donation Means Less Cost to Taxpayers

The provision of health insurance removes a major disincentive to donation—the lack of health insurance at the time of donation and in the future. It removes the fear that short- or long-term complications of donation will result in out-of-pocket expenses for the donor. It removes the fear that a donor will not be able to find health care coverage after donation. Up to 15% of organ donors are concerned about insurability and this may affect their willingness to donate.

The provision of Medicare to the donor makes a great deal of financial sense. To the extent that such a program would increase organ donation, it would result in a decrease in the cost of dialysis for patients who are transplant candidates. It has been estimated that each living donor kidney decreases overall healthcare costs by 94,579 in 2002 dollars or about 126,000 in 2009 dollars accounting for medical inflation. With the long waiting time for transplantation and with what appears to be the upper limits on deceased donor transplantation the costs for dialysis versus transplantation are enormous and will continue to grow.