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## UK organ donor deal closer

By **KATE FOSTER**

PLANS for a radical overhaul of organ donation laws which could save the lives of up to 500 Scots every year have taken a major step forward following the first formal talks between senior health officials from Scotland and England.

UK Health Secretary Alan Johnson is now "sympathetic" to the idea of a change in the law to an opt-out system of presumed consent, Scotland on Sunday can reveal.

This would allow doctors to take organs for transplantation unless relatives specifically objected and drive up donation rates towards those already commonplace in other European countries.

Officials representing Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for Health, Nicola Sturgeon, and Johnson met last week in London to discuss pushing ahead with a change in the law. Scotland on Sunday is currently campaigning for the presumed consent system to be adopted.

The officials met to proceed with the first stage, which will involve a group of experts examining how presumed consent could be introduced in Britain. Recommendations will then be made to ministers.

The experts, a subgroup of the Organ Donation Taskforce, have been asked to consider the views of doctors and religious groups before making their recommendations.

Changing the law could save hundreds of Scots who currently die waiting for transplants.

The move will go ahead on a UK-wide basis because organs are donated and received across the UK.

A source close to Sturgeon said last night: "It is happening at an official level and we are moving ahead with this process with a degree of sympathy on both sides. But Nicola is keen that there is a broad public debate on this issue."

Under the system of presumed consent, which has growing support from the public and politicians, organs can be taken for transplantation unless the person registers their desire to 'opt out'.

Relatives would still be consulted in case they felt that the patient may have objected to donation or would themselves be particularly distressed by the removal of organs.

The presumed consent system marks a major change to the current law under which medical staff have to ask relatives if they agree to their relatives' organs being used. It is aimed at ensuring that everyone who would wish to become an organ donor can do so.

According to a recent YouGov survey for the British Medical Association, 74% of Scots believe the UK should move to a system of presumed consent.

Although 79% of Scots would want to donate organs, fewer than 25% are on the organ donor register.

There are currently 7,575 patients waiting for transplants in the UK and the list is growing.

A presumed consent system already operates in a number of other countries including Spain, where organ donation rates are 33.6 organs per million compared with just 13 organs per million in the UK.

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