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Would you part with a kidney for cash?

Two economists argue that America could ease its organ shortage for transplants by paying living donors for one of their kidneys or for a portion of their livers.

They estimate that the annual number of U.S. kidney transplants would rise 44 percent and liver transplants would rise 57 percent.

So how much is an organ worth? The authors considered factors such as days lost from work because of surgery and the risk of complications and death. That comes out to about \$15,200 for a kidney and \$38,000 for a piece of your liver (a partial-liver donation being riskier).

Critics say such payments are immoral because they would encourage people -- especially the poor -- to put themselves in danger. It also treats the human body as a commodity.

Economist Julio Elías of the University at Buffalo understands those concerns. But in the end, he reasons that thousands of lives would be saved, and the overall cost to the health-care system would be reduced.

How so? Successful transplant patients will need less medical care after the operations.

"Clearly this looks like a very good solution to the problem" of long waiting lists for transplants, said Elías, an assistant professor.

The study was published in a recent edition of the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*.

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