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Australian doctor proposes US\$47,000 payment for kidney donation, sparking debate



By TANALEE SMITH, Associated Press Writer
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SYDNEY, Australia - An Australian kidney specialist sparked national debate Monday by suggesting the government should pay up to 50,000 Australian dollars (US\$47,000; $\text{A}\$30,400$) for kidney donations to overcome a chronic shortage.

Gavin Carney said eliminating a law that prohibits the selling of organs would save thousands of lives and billions of dollars (euros) in care for patients on organ waiting lists. He also said it would stop people from going to Third World countries and paying for black-market organs and risky, unregulated surgeries.

Australia has one of the world's lowest rates of organ donation, about 10 donors per 1 million people, according to Transplant Australia, a national charity and organ support group.

"We've tried everything to drum up support for organ donation and the rates have not risen in 10 years," Carney was quoted as saying in Fairfax newspapers. "People just don't seem to be willing to give their organs away for free. ... Let's pay people some money for a new car or a house deposit and those waiting lists will be halved within about five years."

Carney, a professor at the Australian National University, could not immediately be reached by The Associated Press.

Carney's proposal was immediately criticized by transplant groups, who fear it would exploit poor people.

The idea was quashed by Health Minister Nicola Roxon, who said Australians would not be allowed to market their organs. "But we do know that we need urgent action in this area of organ donation," Roxon told Australia Broadcasting Corp. radio.

Rather than paying people for organs, Roxon said her ministry would act on some of the recommendations of a federal task force that recently completed a review of the organ donation system. She did not give further details.

Selling or buying organs in Australia carries a penalty of six months in jail and a fine of up to A\$4,400 (US\$4,130; $\text{A}\$2,670$).

More than 1,800 people are waiting for kidney transplants in the country but only 343 kidneys were donated last year, Fairfax reported. Transplant Australia said the average wait for a kidney transplant is four years.

Transplant Australia chief executive Chris Thomas said his organization rejects paying for organs and instead is working with the government to change the donation system. He said Carney's proposal would leave poor people vulnerable.

"It really focuses on the poor and people who are least able to pay for things in society. They get attracted to these types of things," he told ABC Radio. "We'd reject that."

Kidney Health Australia also rejected Carney's proposal, saying it would be open to "many ethical issues and abuse."

"In my opinion it is inappropriate for the Australian medical system to consider, and is counter to the Australian culture which promises an equitable approach in all things," KHA medical director Tim Mathew told The Associated Press. "The commercial trade in organs is not something we can support."

Carney said the suggestion that paid donation would exploit poor people was "a red herring," telling ABC radio that government regulation of organ commercialization would ensure high ethical standards and medical safeguards.

"I don't support (illegal trade)," Carney said. "But I also do not agree with the fact that we should let people just rot on dialysis until they have been on dialysis so long they are untransplantable."

Last week, health officials in the Philippines announced that foreigners will be banned from receiving kidneys for transplant there in an attempt to crack down on a thriving black market in organs sold by poor people.

"The sale of one's body parts is condemnable and ethically improper. We have to stop it," Health Secretary Francisco Duque said in announcing the ban.

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