

The National

Trafficking in organs still issue for India

Desperate poor willing to sell their body parts while black market traders dupe doctors into performing surgeries

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MUMBAI/India is rightly proud of its status as one of the world's fastest growing economies. But there is another, less admirable label that refuses to go away. Despite the country's best efforts to eradicate the black market trade in human organs, India remains a reputation as an easy place to buy a kidney.

Laws forbidding organ trafficking have been in place since 1994, yet still the black market trade goes on, as was highlighted by the case of the Apollo Hospital in New Delhi, one of the best hospitals in India.

Doctors there admitted they were duped into removing kidneys for transplant that ended up being sold for cash to organ traffickers. The doctors were deceived by fake documents which purported to show that the organ donors were undergoing surgery to help sick relatives. In fact, the organ was removed so the donor could sell for cash.

The hospital declared it had been the victim of "a well-orchestrated operation to cheat patients and the hospital".

Five people have been arrested, including two hospital workers. It is an unsettling story but it also highlights another incoherent truth: India's need for donated organs is far greater than its supply.

There are many reasons for this, both practical and cultural. The very concept of organ donation is relatively new in India and the western notion of removing organs primarily from people who have been declared brain-dead is even more unfamiliar, says Rakesh Rai, a senior consultant and transplant surgeon at Apollo Hospital in Malad, a suburb of Mumbai.

"India is a huge country with 80 per cent of people still living in villages, so no one here is so educated that they understand about organ donation," said Dr Rai.

"The second problem is not all doctors know how to identify the people who can donate their



Ngapirets, with two of her three sons in front of her shack in Lachima, India, sold her kidney. (Source: AP/Wide World for The Indian)

organs and they're not geared towards organ donations."

Lack of understanding coupled with real or perceived religious restrictions have further kept the organ supply far below demand.

"It's basically due to the lack of awareness among the general population," said Rajendra Patankar, the chief operating officer at the Narayana Super Speciality Hospital in Mumbai.

"There are certain people who feel it is restricted as per their religion. That is not the case in reality - most of the religions in India permit organ donation."

Then there are the horror stories, which are a powerful deterrent.

"Earlier transplants were mis-

used by some and [the procedure] got a bad name so people are scared as well," said Dr

Patankar. He even knows of cases where patients were admitted to hospital for a quite different procedure only to wake up and find their organs had been removed.

Diabetes is rife in India. Unmanaged diabetes leads to organ failure, necessitating a transplant. India also receives many requests for organs from abroad and so the underground trade persists. It has unbeknownstly decreased but it is still there.

Recently reports surfaced from Pandoli, a small community in the western state of Gujarat where a number of unpowered

labored villagers were allegedly persuaded or manipulated into selling their kidneys to solve their financial problems.

"There are still a few small pockets where you have some

kind of buying and selling of kidneys going on," said Suresh Shroff, a transplant surgeon and managing trustee of the Mohan Foundation, an NGO that promotes organ donation in India.

The transplantation of human organs and, forbidding commercial trade in organs, came into being in 1994 and has proved effective. "With time it has definitely come down," said Dr Shroff.

"The government has been very strict and a lot of people have been prosecuted. The middlemen have been put behind bars and some of the doctors have been prosecuted."

To promote organ donation as a positive thing, the authorities have enlisted the help of celebrities such as Bollywood actor Akshay Khan, who has pledged to donate his organs. However,

the crackdown on illegal practice and the awareness-raising might simply have helped shift the problem elsewhere.

According to Dr Shroff, the current hotspot for the illegal transplants is Sri Lanka.

Earlier this year Sri Lanka suspended all kidney transplants for five years after Indian police linked kidney racketeers to doctors based in Sri Lanka.

Meanwhile, the shortage of organ donors in India has led to doctors employing innovative treatments, such as live donors donating a part of the liver for transplant - an alternative that is as successful as taking organs from a dead body and far less upsetting for the families of transplant patients.

Rebecca Basudan is a freelance journalist based in London. She has written for The Indian Express, The New York Times, and The Guardian.