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Organ Transplants

Session L18

- George J. Annas, "The Prostitute, the Playboy, and the Poet: Rationing Schemes for Organ Transplantation," *American Journal of Public Health* 72 (1985): 187-189.
- Robert Steinbrock, "Public Solicitation of Organ Donors," *New England Journal of Medicine* 353 (4 August 2005): 441-444.
- Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "The Global Traffic in Human Organs," *Current Anthropology* 41 (April 2000): 191-211.

Organ transplantation raises a vast array of ethical issues, the surface of which we can only scratch. The readings focus on various consequences of the problem of scarcity: the seeming fact that there are more people needing organs than people willing to donate them. How can you increase supply? How can you reduce demand? How should you make best use of a scarce resource? All of these are difficult and unresolved questions.

Annas, "The Prostitute, the Playboy, and the Poet": Annas, as prominent bioethicist, wrote this influential article relatively early in the debates about rationing organs. Read this article carefully: it defines important problems quite clearly. Early efforts in the late 1960s, which used committees to allocate organs, quickly ran into problems. Annas describes four alternative ways of allocating organs: markets, committees, lotteries, and self-delusion (denial that anything is being rationed). What are the advantages and disadvantages of each? What kind of system does Annas recommend? Can you devise a better system?

Steinbrock, "Public Solicitation": Steinbrock, a physician and commentator on many issues in health policy, describes a recent development: the emergence of web-based efforts to solicit organs from living donors and match them to possible recipients. Why has this been so controversial? Should people be able to restrict what sort of person can receive their organs? Why is a commercial market in organs (direct payments for donations) so distasteful? Go to the website yourself and check it out (<http://matchingdonors.com/life/index.cfm>): are you going to sign up?

Scheper-Hughes, "Global Traffic": Scheper-Hughes, an influential and controversial anthropologist, explores the consequences of the global market in organs for transplantation. This is a long and complicated piece -- don't get bogged down in the details. The most important material is her description of transplant practices and markets in India, South Africa, and Brazil. Try to get a sense of the different things that are happening (kidneys as dowries, kidnapping for organs, use of executed criminals, etc.). Since she is trying to study illegal practices, she often has to rely on rumors and unverified reports. Despite this, does she produce enough information to leave you feeling queasy? Think hard about some of the specific issues. What exactly is wrong with rich people buying organs from poor people? What exactly is wrong with using organs from executed criminals? Pay particular attention to her discussion of scarcity and supply (pp. 198-199): does this change your perception of the problem?