

Organ and Tissue Donor Referral Bias in the Emergency Department

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Introduction

Screening for organ and tissue donation is an essential skill for physicians who manage critically ill patients. In 2015, 4564 Canadians were on a waiting list for organ transplant and 242 died prior to receiving their transplant. As our donation rates are less than half that of comparable countries, we must ensure we identify all potential donors.

Unfamiliarity with policy and procedure involved with donation often compromises successful referral due to early exclusion of potential donors. This survey identifies factors and biases influencing referral of potential donors in the emergency department.

Methods

In this cross-sectional survey, members of the Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians were invited to participate. Participants were presented with 20 scenarios and indicated if they would refer the patient for consideration for organ or tissue donation. Results were reported descriptively and associations between demographic information and referral patterns were assessed.

Results

208 physicians participated. Situations associated with a lower referral rate included a diagnosis of liver cancer, breast cancer, Hepatitis C or sepsis, prolonged cardiopulmonary resuscitation, obesity and warm water drowning. Physician factors that influenced the likelihood to refer for donation included previous donation training, previous donation referrals, availability of donation support, years of service, working in an urban center, Emergency Medicine certification, gender, and having signed identification indicating one's desire to be a potential donor.

Conclusions

Both patient and physician characteristics influenced physician decisions to refer potential donors. Although guidelines vary significantly between provinces, many of these factors are not contraindications for referral. These findings represent missed opportunities for potential donors, and targeted training supporting the referral process may help to improve morbidity and mortality for Canadians requiring organ or tissue donation.