

Debate sobre Mercados de Organos para Trasplantes

Elias, Julio J. y Roth, Alvin E. (2007)

"Econ One on One: A Market for Kidneys?"

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Julio Elías – Post 1

- The only feasible way to eliminate the large queues in the market for kidney transplants is by significantly increasing the supply of kidneys.
- Even though the benefits of eliminating the organ shortage are significant, many people have opposed proposals to pay for organs, a practice prohibited under present law in almost every country.
- Some critics argue that payment is "immoral" because it involves the "commodification" of body parts, or that the poor will be "coerced." Others are opposed because they simply do not like the idea of the existence of a market for organs.
- However, conclusions about the morality of using prices to encourage supply or ration demand have changed in the past when they were shown to be effective. One example is a carbon tax to cut pollution; another is the use of willingness to pay to reduce the risk of death to measure the (statistical) value of life.

Al Roth – Post 1

- Selling organs is illegal in most countries. Legalizing kidney sales faces substantial, perhaps insuperable obstacles. Just as you can't sell yourself into indentured servitude anymore, some transactions are illegal because enough people find them repugnant. But many people are in urgent need of kidney transplants, so it's helpful to think about steps to relieve the shortage now.
- There would be more live-donor transplants if everyone who wanted to donate a kidney to someone could do so, but a healthy person's kidney is often incompatible with his or her intended donor. So, one way economists have helped is in helping organize kidney exchanges, which allow incompatible patient-donor pairs to exchange with other such pairs.

Julio Elías – Post 2

- In an attempt to increase cadaveric organ donations, some nations have tried to overcome the objections of heirs by enacting into law the principle of "implied consent." However, even with the capture of all potential deceased donor organs, the gap will not be closed.
- I agree with AI: Many people will be horrified by any proposal that allows for monetary compensations for organs and this represents a cost to society. But this does not mean that these costs overwhelm the benefits of eliminating the organ shortage. To my knowledge there are no good estimates of these "repugnancy costs." Even so, I believe they are relatively small when weighted against the number of lives that can be saved. This is a strong force that will push towards a market-based system.

Al Roth – Post 2

- I agree with Julio that there probably aren't enough potential deceased donors to supply all needed kidneys. There are already more live donors than deceased donors in the U.S. Kidney exchange is a way to increase live-donor transplants.
- Before 2004, in just a few cases an incompatible patient-donor pair and their surgeon were able to locate another such pair and arrange an exchange in which the donor in each pair could give a kidney to the patient in the other.
- In 2004 Ünver, Sönmez, and I published an article exploring how a centralized kidney exchange could permit transplantation of many more kidneys. In subsequent work we discovered that when the market is thick enough -- when a large number of patient-donor pairs has been assembled -- almost all feasible transplants can be accomplished through exchanges among just two or three patient-donor pairs at a time, and through chains of exchange.
- We've helped surgeons Frank Delmonico and Mike Rees organize regional kidney exchanges (NEPKE and APD) which now unite dozens of transplant centers, and there is movement towards a national exchange.

Julio Elías – Post 3

- The current system of live organ transplants resembles an autarkic economy in which patients in need of an organ transplant are constrained to the organs available in the pool of friends and relatives. The kidney exchange system developed by Al and others is a barter system, and clearly will provide an improvement over the current system.
- But a general conclusion of economics is that barter is an inferior system when compared to a money system, since barter requires the coincidence of wants. With the use of computers, and a national registry, multilateral barter is a good possibility, but still less efficient than using general purchasing power; i.e., a market. The main disadvantages of the kidney exchange system are the limitations that only kidneys from relatives and friends can be used and that the exchange must happen at the same time. A market-based exchange does not have such serious limitations.

Al Roth – Post 3

- No economist could disagree with Julio that, in general, unrestricted monetary markets have enormous ability to meet human wants. As
- he points out, with kidney exchange we're trying to achieve many of the benefits of a market without using money.
- We're able to make progress because kidney exchange thus avoids the repugnance that kidney sales arouse.
- As market designers, my colleagues and I are often faced with constraints.
- Sometimes constraints can be removed; sometimes, it looks more promising to work around them.
- If Julio and his colleagues want to remove the legal constraint on buying kidneys, my guess is that they will want to understand better the sources of repugnance that have led to laws against such sales in so many countries.

Julio Elías – Post 4

- The potential benefits of a market system may have seemed low compared to the costs of implementing a new system when the legal constraints were implemented, since the shortage was not so severe. Currently the kidney waiting list is over 73,000 persons, and in the last 10 years it has grown at an annual rate of 7%. Additionally, improvements in the safety and effectiveness in kidney transplantation have significantly increased the potential benefits.
- Programs of financial compensation for living organ donors can take many forms. However, there are certain features that are likely to be common across any compensation system of organ procurement. More importantly, many of those features are in effect in the current system, like the role of the physician and transplant centers in the proper screening and selection of donors, in post-transplant care, and in other steps of the process of organ procurement.

Al Roth – Post 4

- It is illegal to sell horsemeat for human consumption in California, not because a persuasive case was made that the costs exceed the benefits, but because 4,670,524 people voted to make it illegal in a 1998 referendum. This and many other examples persuade me there is something about repugnance that we economists need to understand.
- Whenever I help design a market, I learn a lot from existing practices, even as I set out to modify them. Explaining what economists already know doesn't inevitably win the day, although such explanations are certainly useful.
- If kidney sales remain banned for a long time, other developments (such as cures for kidney diseases, or breakthroughs in using pig kidneys for transplantation) may arrive in time to make kidney sales, and human transplants themselves, unnecessary.
- This is one reason I have been putting my energy into developing kidney exchange: It's a way to combine economics with surgical know-how to achieve real gains soon.