

Support for the opt-out system of organ donation in Wales is high, says new report

Published on Thursday 30 November, the report assesses the initial impact the change in law has had on organ donation rates in Wales, two years on. It shows an increase in levels of support for the system among the public and NHS staff.

Before implementation, seven in ten staff (71%) said that they were in favour of the change in legislation, increasing to more than four-in-five (85%) after implementation. It also shows an increase in the percentage of families giving consent for donation from 44.4% in 2014 to 64.5% in 2017.

More than half of respondents in the September 2017 Wales Omnibus Survey said they had discussed their organ donation wishes with a family member. This figure remained at around four out of ten between 2012 and 2015 but has increased since.

On 1 December 2015, Wales became the first country in the UK to move to a soft opt-out system of consent to organ donation. This means that if a person has not registered a decision to become an organ donor (opted in) or a decision not to become an organ donor (opted out), they will be considered as having no objection to being an organ donor – this is known as deemed consent.

However, if individuals don't tell their families of their decision to donate, the family may not honour that decision, and over-ride the organ donor registration or not support deemed consent.

Organ donation and transplantation activity data for 2016-17 published by NHS Blood and Transplant (NHSBT) shows that in Wales:

- patients who died whilst on the waiting list for their transplant decreased 18.5% from (27 in 2015-16 to 22 in 2016-17)
- The number of donors after brain stem death (DBD) increased by four, from 36 (2015-16) to 40 (2016-17)
- the number of patients residing in Wales receiving cardiac transplants increased by one
- the number of patients residing in Wales receiving a live Kidney transplant increased by five.

A major new advertising campaign was launched in November to help increase public awareness of the law, focusing on the role of families in the organ donation process. The aim of the campaign encourages people to talk to their loved ones about their wishes, so their families can honour their organ donation decisions.

In 2016-17, there were 21 cases in Wales where families either overrode their relatives' decisions to donate organs, or didn't support the deemed consent. With an average of 3.1 organs retrieved per donor in Wales, this could have resulted in as many as 65 additional transplants.

Health Secretary Vaughan Gething said:

"I welcome the findings in the Impact Evaluation and I'm pleased that there are improvements we can celebrate after such a short period. I congratulate the healthcare professionals involved making this a success however, none of what we have achieved would have been possible without the support of the Welsh population.

"I'm delighted that in the first two quarters of this year, our consent rate reached 72% putting us second in the UK, with 39% of the Welsh population registering as organ donors. While this is not reflected in a rise in donors overall, the report suggests this may be because there have been fewer eligible donors over the short period since the change in law.

"We must work harder to further increase organ donation levels while there are people dying waiting for their transplant and to have a significant impact on reducing those waiting lists.

"It's important to remember that it's too early to know what the true impact of the change will be, but I'm confident we have started to create a culture where organ donation is openly discussed.

"While awareness and understanding is increasing, it's really important that we keep the momentum going and continue to monitor, over the long term, the impact of the Act."