

Book Review

Last Best Gifts: Altruism and the Market for Human Blood and Organs

Kieran Healy, University of Chicago Press, 2006; 193 p.

In his first book, Kieran Healy, a sociologist at the University of Arizona, offers a compelling challenge to the regnant categories in the debate over how to increase the procurement of transplantable organs. The central corrective of Healy's book is that a narrow focus on the motivations of individuals (altruism in the case of donation, avarice in the case of markets, and everything in between) overlooks the organizational achievements of procurement organizations. By way of illustration, Healy argues that geographic differences in rates of organ procurement are incompletely understood simply as a difference in the prevalence of altruistic persons. Instead, this discrepancy is better understood in terms of the ways in which procurement organizations function in shaping the meaning of organ donation for donor families, recipients, and society in a way that sustains and encourages the exchange. This apparently modest methodological shift (from individuals to organizations) turns out to have provocative implications for the ongoing debate over organ markets and the future of the gift relationship.

Why think about organ procurement primarily in terms of organizations, rather than individuals? A useful advantage of thinking about the problem of procurement in this way is that it explains, in a way that accounts of individual motivations for donation do not, observed variability in the rates of procurement. As Healy explains, 'If altruism was a strictly individual characteristic, we should not expect donation rates to differ between countries as much as they do' (p. 19). But this understanding of organ procurement produces its own challenges, not the least of which is replacing the usual 'gift' language with the syntax of organizational structure. Transplant professionals morally invested in understanding organ donation as a 'gift of life' will pause at Healy's reformulation of the question of organ procurement: 'We can say that the donor procurement system helps produce altruism through its policies, practices and cultural work and that it has industrialized altruism by treating it as a resource-extraction problem' (p. 44). If such language triggers a certain discomfort, it is probably because '...collection organizations become committed to their own public accounts of donation, and think about their interests and obligations in ways that reflect the content

of the relationship they have with suppliers and recipients' (p. 113).

Healy makes a convincing case that sometimes, these organizational commitments do not serve the interests of patients. Revisiting the history of the spread of HIV in the blood supply, Healy explains how non-profit organizations procuring whole blood and for-profit organizations procuring plasma products reacted to similar concerns about the integrity of their product. Non-profit organizations tended to rely on a loyal base of blood donors to sustain their efforts. Thus, screening measures (such as explicitly inquiring about high-risk sexual behaviors), which might have offended and effectively reduced members of the donor base, were viewed skeptically by the organization. On the other hand, for-profit plasma procurers relied on a steady supply of recipients (such as patients with hemophilia), as there was no shortage of paid plasma vendors. Anything that threatened the lives of those recipients would also pose a threat to their business. Thus, the organizational commitments of the non-profits engendered skepticism about prevention measures, which in turn led to the unchecked spread of HIV in the blood supply. But, the commitment to profit also led plasma vendors to try and sell plasma procured prior to the institution of effective screening procedures. Both organizations ultimately failed, but Healy's salient point is that these failures are best understood through the prism of their organizational commitments.

This heuristic casts the debate over financial incentives for organ procurement in a very different light. Healy endorses neither the narrative of gift nor the narrative of sale *per se*, but encourages the reader to understand both in the context of interactions between individuals and organizations. Therefore, organ sales need not be exploitative or dehumanizing, and not all gifts are plausibly understood as selfless acts that breed solidarity. Indeed, as the chasm between the demand for and supply of organs continues to grow, Healy argues that a sustained emphasis on 'the ideology of the pure gift' may '...mask the social relations that link givers and recipients, and become imbued with powers they do not really have – such as the power to guarantee the fairness of an exchange or produce solidarity in a community' (p. 129). When those expectations are disappointed, a significant strain is put upon the social imperative for altruistic donation. On the eve of a vast reconsideration of the allocation system for transplantable kidneys, I found

Book Review

it sobering that, among the possible futures for organ procurement, Healy views this one to be the most likely to occur.

In the end, Healy endorses 'fair exchange' as a useful metric of the success of an organ procurement system, but, in my view, he wisely refrains from developing this concept in too much detail, since these sorts of judgments presuppose a broad understanding of the complex relationships Healy elucidates with analytic prowess and clear prose. Whatever one's views on how the future of organ

procurement should take shape, this concise, accessible, and provocative book is essential reading.

Benjamin Hippen

Carolinas Medical Center – Metrolina

Nephrology Associates, P.A., 2711

Randolph Road, Bldg. 400, Charlotte,

NC 28207-2027