

Kidneys for Sale

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Why do people offer to sell a kidney? On an online forum of postings offering organs for sale, some offered explanations:

“I’m willing to sell my kidney to pay my debts.”

“I need some money urgently. I need some handsome amount.”

“The reason I am doing this is because the world does not measure wealth by having your health and a good family it is based on money.”

“I really need cash.”

“I’m in deep financial problems.”

“I’m trying to bounce back from financial ruin.”

“I have so many bank loans to pay back.”

“[I am] selling my Kidney to secure the future of my family.”

Out of 53 people, only two mentioned reasons that were not explicitly financial. One posting said, “I want to sell my one of my kidneys to help a friend in need... Now that he's in need, I want to risk my life for him, he who gave value to my life...” The other explained, “I want to sell my kidney to help my love,” most likely financially.

Clearly, people in desperate situations turn to desperate measures. But does that mean that selling an organ is necessarily right or wrong? It is certainly a quick, relatively easy (if not quite painless) way to get a large amount of money. I do not believe that selling an organ is inherently wrong. People have a right to do as they wish with their own bodies; organs are your own to use or abuse, as the case may be. Still, it is apparent

that the selling of kidneys offers significant chances for economic exploitation, which is a growing problem.

Almost all of the postings had email addresses so that potential buyers could contact them. I tried 49 postings (all of the ones from November 6 through 25, 2009), and found 17 working addresses, which I then contacted. I got six responses. Each was asked, “Do you think that selling a kidney is a good opportunity to improve someone's economic situation, or do you think it exploits peoples' economic circumstances?” They were also asked why they were offering to sell their kidney. Their reasons why were in line with the other postings, again citing financial reasons. Their responses ranged in detail, however, from the terse “Financial circumstances” to the verbose:

I am wanting to sell my kidney because I own my own business, its completley [sic] failing due to recession, I have not paid myself for some time, had rent cheques at home and work bounce, have not paid child support in several months which I could be charged for at anytime if my son's mom wanted too [sic], have not bought myself food for sometime (other than very cheap noodle packs) and just don't see any reason to continue working or living if I do it in constant fear of having everything crumble on me. So \$75,000.00 for a kidney is 100% worth it for myself as that would be an outstanding amount of money to help me cover my debts and troubles.

The latter respondent, “A,”* added, “I do believe it’s a good opportunity to improve my economic situation.”

All seller respondents agreed that it was a good opportunity, although some considered its negative effects as well. “R” said, “I think it is the absolute right for a person to make the considered choice to opt to sell a kidney, and yes it provides a one time opportunity to create income. It colud [sic] exploit a person's situation but only if the decision was made under duress or by way of deception.” There is a very real problem that people are coerced or deceived into giving up their organs, and even killed in

extreme cases. This is due to the huge black market for organs, where the middleman often makes the most money, leaving the donor with a fraction of what their kidney was worth. People also worry that if the sale of organs were legalized, the poor would be forced into selling theirs, and not be able to afford to buy one if necessary, thus benefiting the rich only. This, too, is a legitimate concern.

“C” responded, “Yes actually I do think it's a great way to earn a large sum in a short period. I think the person doing it is fully aware of all the risks involved. The funny part if it was for a family member I would give it free. Yet If I can make a large sum plus help someone I'm all for it.” C brings up an interesting idea, that of altruistic donations. Many question whether, if the sale of organs were legalized, people would still be willing to donate for free, even to a relative.

“C” also mentioned that he “tried a kidney registry in the US. The minute I brought up money even to cover travel and after care I was threatened with FBI. I said call them and make sure you spell my name correct. Funny a woman can sell her eggs and carry another person’s baby then get 60 grand after but that's ethical, I choose to use my body the way I want to and it's a federal crime.” This too, is a relevant question – how can a woman be allowed sell her eggs, and a person not be allowed to sell a kidney? What is the difference between the two? Neither is regenerative, and neither significantly affects a person’s health (although kidney removal probably does affect it more).

“N” replied,

“...Selling kidney is a good opportunity to improve someone's economic situation. I will say that the someone is very important for you that time no matter to sell a kidney or any other organ. And this may give a new life to a person who is surviving to live you can help your loved one economically and indirectly you are giving life to someone who is dying, and I am selling my kidney to help my love...so in my view whatever I

am doing is right.”

“N’s” response is significant in that it points out that the benefit of selling a kidney works both ways – the ‘donation’ can be lifesaving, and if the sale of kidneys were legalized, there would be arguably many more ‘donations,’ and as a result, many more lives saved.

Though most postings simply stated their contact information and price, one person offered his ethical views on the situation as well.

Well then if I can sell my kidney then, This si [sic] a good thing. Because at least I know where and to whom its going to not some...idiot or some unwearthy [sic] person after I’m dead ... I’m interested in help or selling to a child... Its high time the government [sic] stops giving to who ever they want and not the ones on a wating [sic] list when I know very well there are a lot on a wating [sic] list and cant get a kidney or blood that people are in need right now and cant get one or the proper blood or liver that they need. We all have to die and I know that children are on a wating [sic] list and can’t get one.

Again, this comment raises interesting questions. Are there people who are “unworthy” of an organ donation, or a second chance at life? Should people be allowed to stipulate who gets their organs? Is a waiting list the fairest option, or should there be merit- or age-based considerations (children as priorities, as this person indicates)?

One of the email respondents was not offering to sell, but actually to buy a part of a liver on behalf of his relative. His view was different. “B” said,

As far as economic situation is concerned, selling organs doesn't improve anything, maybe for a time being. There are so many people in the world who do not have a way to earn living so they go beyond ethical values and do anything to make their ends meet. In a way you can say it exploits help themselves temporarily and then leave them to suffer for life. Ethically, if you ask me it is wrong.”

This is particularly interesting, as he is evidently compromising his morals (by engaging in buying an organ) for the sake of his relative’s life. It is true that selling an

organ is only a “one-time opportunity to create income” as “R” said. Some also worry that a large, sudden cash influx cannot be handled properly by those who have never had much money before, and thus they end up sometimes worse off than before.

There are many problems with the idea of the legalized sale of kidneys. It will benefit the rich, who can afford to pay. People will be coerced. No one will donate for free if they can get money for it. People who receive money may not even have a net benefit, if the money is wasted or less than they needed.

And yet, reading posting after posting of people in desperate straits, it becomes clear that this problem of the organ black market will not go away. To ignore it is ludicrous; to hope that law enforcement will control it all is wishful thinking. Yes, there are problems, to which there are no cure-all solutions. If there were significant regulation of the market, international cooperation, and fixed prices, it would be a start. Perhaps if health care covered the price of a kidney, it would take care of the problem of benefiting the rich, and if sales were made directly to the waiting list, fairness of some sort would still be ensured. However, these are just suggestions, not policy, and they, too, have their drawbacks. But I believe that it is the right of a person to control his/her own body, and thus be able to use it (and the organs in it) as they wish. People should be allowed to sell their organs, because, despite the problems, there will be benefits too. If more people are willing to part with kidneys and organs because they (or their estate) will receive money for it, then more lives will be saved. Granted, it’s not an ideal incentive (we hope, ideally, that people will want to save lives in any case) but it certainly is a practical one. In addition, the fact that it is legal to sell a woman’s eggs and not a kidney is inconsistent.

The situations are not very different. The sale of eggs potentially grants life, and so does the sale of kidneys.

People around the world are selling their kidneys because they need money. This is occurring now, and will continue to occur, despite the fact that it is completely illegal. To answer my own question from the email to sellers, I believe that selling a kidney is a good opportunity with the potential for economic exploitation. If it were legalized, with considerable oversight, perhaps the market would be improved. However, this is not an ideal world, and there are considerable problems with the situation, legal or not. Although deciding the legal status of organ sales is tricky, the ethical status, in my mind, is not. If people own anything at all, it is their bodies. People have a right to control and own their own bodies, and therefore have a right to sell, keep, use, or abuse their own organs.

Sources:

“A.” Email interview. Nov. 26, 2009.

“B.” Email interview. Nov. 25, 2009.

“C.” Email interview. Nov. 25, 2009 & Dec 6, 2009.

“N.” Email interview. Nov. 26, 2009.

“R.” Email interview. Nov. 19, 2009.

Various postings from website, September 23 – November 20.

*All interviewees are anonymous, for obvious reasons. The website with postings, for the same reason, cannot be cited.