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EDITORIAL

How to handle scientific articles on organ transplantation coming from China in 2019?

**KEYWORDS**

Transplantation;
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What is the problem?

As the world's most populated country, China has high numbers of patients with end stage organ diseases in need of an organ transplant. China's organ transplant program, which has seen its most significant growth in the last 20 years, was not set up from the beginning to obtain organs from voluntary deceased organ donors. Other than kidneys donated from living related donors, the main source of organs (heart, liver and kidney) was from executed death row prisoners. China is not unique for using organs from executed prisoners. A few cases in France in the early 50s have also been reported and there are likely other countries which did the same. However, since that time, all countries, except China, have banished these practices, and a growing number of international bodies including the World Health Organization (WHO), the Transplantation Society (TTS), International Society of Nephrology (ISN) and the Declaration of Istanbul Custodian Group (DICG) have explicitly spoken out against the use of organs of executed prisoners [1,2].

In the efforts to force China to stop using organs from executed prisoners, TTS and its associated scientific journals, decided in 2006 not to accept any paper from China dealing with transplantation activity using these kinds of donors [3]. It took several years for this action and other forms of political pressure by the international transplant community to induce a change in China's organ procurement practices. From 2006 to 2010, it has been argued that the use of organs from executed prisoners was significantly reduced, however the low numbers of recorded deceased

donors from hospitals cannot explain the overall transplantation activity during this period. Between 2010 and 2014, considerable efforts have been made by Chinese authorities to set up a program of organ donation and allocation with the ethical and transparency requirements of the international standards. Despite a significant, and even impressive growth of organ donations and transplantations resulting from this program, it is still authorized in China that executed prisoners be used for organ procurement if they give before their "informed consent", indicating that actually executed prisoners are still used [4]. However, it is difficult to check if a death sentenced prisoner acts and decides as a free volunteer. The number of organ transplantations in China increased rapidly during the last years, and the exact number of transplantations performed from prisoners is unknown. Advocacy groups, such as "Doctors against forced organ harvesting" (DAFOH, DAFOH.org), Chinatribunal (Chinatribunal.org) another independent group of people against forced organ harvesting in China claim that a large number of prisoners of conscience are still used in China. The definitive proofs that these unethical practices are still operational are lacking and would need local transparent investigations in different centers in China.

What are the international ethical rules for organ procurement

As mentioned above, the DICG was co-founded by TTS and ISN to prevent organ trafficking and transplant tourism. It has been said that around 5–10% of the kidney transplantations performed each year in the world are due to organ trafficking, but hard data about this are lacking since there is no global registry to date. Despite the efforts of the WHO, the Council of Europe, TTS, ISN and DICG and others, this number does not seem to decline and may actually increase. The WHO Guiding Principles explicitly state that organ donation from a deceased donor must have been approved by the patient himself, before he died, or his family,

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according to the country laws. The Declaration of Istanbul states that the act of organ donation should be altruistic and financially neutral. Any kind of compensation for the donor or donor family are considered to be organ trafficking and are unethical [5]. The Declaration of Istanbul has been endorsed by more than 180 organizations and countries in the world, but has not been endorsed yet by China, rising the suspicion of China's resistance to accept international ethical principles.

How to convince China to adopt and respect these rules?

The international pressure on China is quite strong since 2006 for publication of scientific paper and since 2008 for the ethical principles that must be respected as indicated in the Declaration of Istanbul.

According to TTS statement, the submitted papers should not be accepted for publication in international journals if:

- the donors are prisoners;
- the Internal Review Board (IRB) has not approved the study;
- the patient did not give his informed consent [6].

Despite these strong recommendations, a recent analysis of the most significant papers on organ transplantation, other than kidney, published in the international literature and coming from China indicates that 92.5% of the papers fail to report whether or not organs were harvested from prisoners, but 73% reported approval from an IRB [7]. In addition, of those claiming that no prisoners' organ were obtained, many of them involved organ transplantations performed before 2010, at a time where no deceased donor program was significantly developed in China. According to the analysis, around 500 scientific papers are now available in the literature that involved executed prisoners as a source of organ. For international journals, the conclusions are appalling, since they are guilty at the minimum of lack of vigilance, and at the maximum of complicity in illegal practices [7].

Conclusion: what do the referees, the editors and publishers should do?

Editors and publishers should work on the already published papers and identify them using a simple set of criteria to label the papers as "appropriate or likely appropriate", "wrong, to be retracted" and in the doubt as "doubtful". The retraction of these papers would put a strong pressure on China to adopt the international standards [7]. For the new papers, which are submitted for publication, it is important to check when the patients were included, since before 2014 it is difficult to ascertain that there was no prisoner in the donors. In addition, the referees must ask the authors to clearly state "where do the organs come from", that "no executed prisoner (even with his/her consent) was involved", and that "the study was approved by an IRB and in accordance with the Declaration of Istanbul". Doing this, it is hoped that the scientific journals will contribute

strongly to improve the ethical practices in China but also in other areas in the world.

"Paris ne s'est pas faite en un jour" and we know that it takes time to change the practices and to regulate organ donation and allocation in a such big country as China. The international scientific community should encourage and help China to reach the international standards in organ transplantation. Being rigorous and vigilant on the quality of the publications, and on the origin of the donors is one way to do so.

Disclosure of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

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