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When Altruism Isn't Enough

THE CASE FOR COMPENSATING
KIDNEY DONORS

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America faces a desperate organ shortage. Today, more than 76,000 people are waiting for a kidney. About one in four will receive a transplant this year; the rest will either die—at the rate of twelve per day—or languish on dialysis as their names crawl to the top of the national list, an ordeal that can take up to eight years.

Despite decades of public education about the virtues of organ donation, only 6,000 living donors stepped forward last year; another 7,400 people allowed their organs to be transplanted after their death. The gap between the need and the supply of organs for transplantation is large—and growing. What can be done?

Though altruism often moves relatives and friends to donate to a loved one, strangers usually need a stronger incentive if they are to relinquish an organ. Compensation, in some form, for organ donations could motivate thousands of new donors to come forward—but the 1984 National Organ Transplant Act (NOTA) made it a felony to provide any material reward for organ donation.

When Altruism Isn't Enough (AEI Press, October 2008) argues that compensating people who donate an organ to a desperate stranger—an extraordinary act of live-saving value—will motivate others to do the same, increase the national supply of kidneys, and reduce needless death and suffering. It is the first book to describe in detail how a government-regulated, compensation-based system for living donors could be designed. Contributors to the volume—physicians, legal scholars, economists, and philosophers—set the stage for reform of NOTA by showing how compensating donors would be ethically permissible, economically justifiable, and pragmatically achievable.

When Altruism Isn't Enough calls on government-regulated entities to offer appropriate incentives (such as health insurance, tax credits, tuition vouchers, or a contribution to a tax-free retirement account) to individuals willing to donate a kidney to a stranger. Rigorous protections for the safety of donors are integral to the implementation of regulated exchange programs.

And because the compensation would be provided by a third party, every patient in need, regardless of income, would benefit.

Altruism is a beautiful virtue but relying on it as the sole motivation for giving an organ ensures we will never have enough of them. The gift of life is priceless—people who give it should receive some material reward for their generosity. Constructing an incentive-based program to increase the supply of transplantable organs—and to suppress unauthorized markets overseas—has become a moral imperative.



Dr. Satel, a psychiatrist, studies domestic drug policy, mental health policy (including the psychological impact of war and disasters), and political trends in medicine. Coauthor of

One Nation Under Therapy and author of PC, M.D., she also works as a staff psychiatrist at the Oasis Drug Treatment Clinic.

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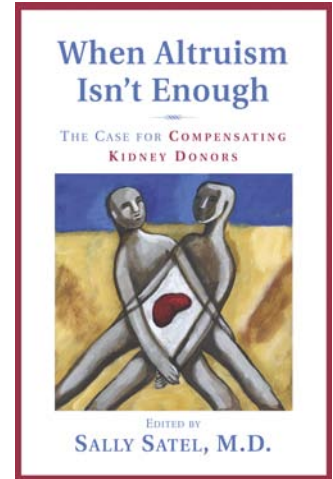
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