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## Health education in the service of organ transplantation

### Abstract

There are around 10.000 people in Poland who have undergone an organ transplantation at some point in their lives. This procedure allowed those people to enjoy regained health and successfully return to normal life, with the previously assigned roles at work, in their family and in society.

Despite the advances in transplantation, a half of the people waiting for this form of treatment would die, since there are no organs to be transplanted. This state of affairs is caused by the low awareness among the Polish society. Polish people have very low confidence in this treatment method. They lack a basic understanding of the essential medical and legal procedures defining the organization of organ transplantation.

Health educators should address concerns that emerge in society and to present a positive image of transplantation, as a science saving people's lives. Educating young people about organ transplantation, since their earliest days at school, provides a chance to shape a positive attitude towards the issues of organ transplantation.

This article attempts to answer the following questions: what is health education, organ transplantation, and what are the goals of the health education programs promoting organ transplantation?

**Keywords:** organ transplantation, health education, social awareness.

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### INTRODUCTION

The current reality is shaped by an intense development of science and technology. This means, issues related to health, diseases, death are extremely difficult to discuss. In particular, this pertains to complicated or even controversial problems of organ transplantation, the development of which is possible thanks to conducting extensive educational activities.

In order to achieve this, it is necessary to broaden the knowledge of transplantation, both on the individual and social level. Such efforts should be done both among young people and adults which is possible through various health education activities [1].

#### What is health education?

Health education is "a means of teaching people how to care for both their own, as well as other people's health" [2]. It should be a series of combined activities, all focused on health as the value which humans would be striving for [3]. Initially, people should learn about health as much as possible. The steady growth of knowledge has a positive effect on the change of an individual's lifestyle by avoiding the factors harmful to health, and at the same time increasing the frequency of healthy behavior. The competences gained in that process can shape the skills of an individual to improve their own health [3].

A pathogenetic model and a salutogenic model both had a huge influence over the perception of health education as a science [3]. The former model focuses on the disease, its symptoms and conditions, whilst "health potential, quality of life and the ability to self-realization" are in the center of understanding the salutogenic model [2].

On the basis of these models, there are three basic approaches to health education [2]:

- health education focused on diseases,
- health education focused on risk factors,
- health education focused on health.

A variety of approaches aimed at eliminating the diseases and the removal of risk factors disregard "the benefit of being healthy" [2] and the possibility of retaining health [3]. The third approach, focused on health, puts an emphasis on people and social environment [2], while the objective of the action is focused on multiplying the potentials of health [3], in areas like: physical, mental and social structures.

Taking into account the third approach (the one which focuses on health), the educational programs have to be aimed at children and young people. They are highly effective, since young people are usually "vulnerable to both social and educational factors, including those which concern appropriate habits and health behaviors" [2]. That being so, this approach plays an important role in conducting

extensive educational activities aimed at promoting organ transplantation. It gives a chance to shape positive public attitude towards this method of treatment.

### What is transplantation?

Transplantation is defined as “the operational movement of a tissue or a whole organ in case particular conditions are present. It is moved from one place to another in the same person or from one person (donor) to another (recipient), which aims at replacing the loss or restoring its functions” [4].

This natural definition indicates that transplantation is a treatment method saving human lives by transferring healthy and living organs from a donor’s body to the recipient’s body. This method is used when the recipient is fighting a disease or falls under certain medical criteria.

Despite the obvious benefits, inherent to transplantation, nearly half of Poles lack reliable knowledge about the laws binding in our country [5]. The results of research study carried out by CBOS in 2012 looking at the opinions and attitudes of Poles towards transplantation. The findings indicate that three-quarters of respondents are willing to donate their own organs after death [6]. However, a large percentage of the respondents remarked they do not agree for transferring organs from the body of a deceased family member [9]. A minor percentage of the respondents informs their family members about their own attitude towards organ transplantation [6], which makes the transplantation proceedings even more challenging.

Research results make one wonder about the issues of organ transplantation and encourage to intensify educational activities. Hence, the number of potential donors may appear.

Professor Wojciech Rowiński [7], a surgeon and a transplantologist, emphasizes that the development of transplantation medicine is inhibited by the low level of public awareness. The sources of the situation are ascribed to the issues which are difficult in terms of public perception. The issues are related to the agreement of the donation of organs from the bodies of deceased closed ones, selection of the recipient of the organ and the recognition of death based on the criteria and definition of brain death [7] according to which brain stem death is a definite death of a human.

These controversial issues are regulated by the Transplant Act of 1 July 2005 about the harvesting, transplantation of cells, tissues and organs [8]. In light of the Polish law, the rule of presumed consent is binding in such case. This rule defines the potential donor as an individual who had not expressed a formal objection to the use of organs after death during their lifetime. The death of a person is pronounced by an independent committee, which consists of three experts in the field of anesthesiology and neurosurgery. According to laws and medical criteria, the moment when an organ or a tissue is harvested is indicated by the death of a brain stem. The selection process of a potential organ recipient is made “on the basis of a list of people qualified to transplant” [5] taking into account the patient’s current state of health. „Poltransplant” is the supervisory body responsible for monitoring the proper course of transplantation [5,7,8].

### The role of health education in promoting organ transplantation

Health education and organ transplantation have a common denominator, namely protecting human life or health. The factors limiting social trust should be removed from the treatment procedure, as well as organ transplantation. Also, more information on the benefits of offering one’s own organs to another person should be provided [1].

It is teachers’ responsibility to promote this idea in the school environment. Such efforts should involve young people in implementing actions of the 3<sup>rd</sup> health revolution, which was initiated by Julian Aleksandrowicz in the 1970s and shape the mature attitude of students towards health understood as individual and social welfare [3].

The goal of health education which means promoting transplantation, should be familiarizing with the essence of transplantation and promoting among the young generation the belief that organ transplants are effective, safe and a recommended treatment method. Teachers should be encouraging young people to think about signing of declarations of intent. In case students respond positively, they should be reminded about the necessity to inform their relatives or caretakers about their attitude towards organ transplant.

Activities promoting transplantation should inspire young people to take part in actions supporting organ transplantation as well as creating their own initiatives in and outside school in the form of volunteering, which is an ideal form of shaping their own personality.

These tasks, provided that they are performed regularly, have an opportunity to exert positive influence over the level of public awareness about transplantation. The increase of knowledge will help understand the criteria of brain death and contribute to a positive attitude toward the necessity of offering healthy organs to the sick individuals, who are waiting for the offer of hope for recovery.

### CONCLUSION

Transplanting tissues or organs is a complex issue since it touches the ethical, social and moral grounds. Transplantation has the potential to change the stereotypical image of life [9]. The complement of the progress of modern medicine saving human life is proper preparation of the public to present an informed and mature attitude with regard to transplantation, as the science and practice of saving human life.

Health educators, mostly teachers, are responsible for creating a positive image of transplantation as a science, as it is not only a tool for fighting the disease, but above all a source of hope for recovery.

Creating a positive social climate in issues regarding organ or tissue transplantation would make it possible to increase the public awareness about organ and tissue transplants, a growth in the number of potential donors and thus intensification of the number of performed transplants which save lives and health of those in need.

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