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Point of View

Persistent Myths Reveal Mistrust of Medical System

By Deborah A. Stone

A HARVARD student was found stabbed on a deserted beach on March 16. What seemed almost more horrifying though was the way his parents found out about his death. They got a phone call from an organ bank asking for their son's body parts. The caller just hung up when he realized the parents hadn't been told yet.

A spokesperson for the organ bank later said this had never happened before in her bank's nine-year history. As far as she knew, it had never happened before at any organ bank. But just try to get the public to hear that, complained the public relations person of The Partnership for Organ Donation, a national association of organ banks. Whatever the facts, people believe this sort of thing happens all the time.

It's like an "urban myth," she said, "and there are so many of these circulating — these completely false stories about someone waking up on a park bench with their kidney missing. They're so wrong."

But are they really? If people find it so easy to believe that this sort of thing happens all the time,

isn't it because, in fact, *this sort of thing* does happen all the time? Hospitals are famously where people become "the liver in room 309." Managed care and for-profit medicine have made us all expect more cost-consciousness, in time of illness, than compassion.

A cousin of mine recently died of cancer in his early 80s. A few weeks before, his family brought him to the hospital in excruciating pain. He was not yet comfortable in bed when a social worker came into his room. "I know this is a bad time," she apologized. But since the hospital couldn't do anything for him she said, the family would have to find somewhere else for him to go, preferably that day. "We need the bed," she explained.

It's a short distance from "we need the bed" to "we need the kidney," and people know it. According to Professor Jeffrey Prottas of Brandeis University, an expert in organ donation, the overwhelming reason people give when they say they wouldn't donate their own or a relative's organs is mistrust of the medical system. They fear doctors might not try so hard to save them or their loved ones if there was a prospect of organs to be harvested.

Another urban myth? Perhaps. But we've all heard too many true stories with the same plot: Insurers and hospitals turn their backs on an individual's needs for diagnosis or treatment or humane comfort care. And the industry's defenders justify it with one mindlessly sanctimonious answer: The country is spending too much money on health care. For the good of society, costs have to be cut.

If medical leaders want to encourage the altruism and willingness to pay for others that a good medical system requires, they had better pay attention to those urban myths. They are not just plain wrong. They are indicators that a creeping callousness in American medicine is undermining the public's trust.

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