

Your Next Organ can be Just One Friend Request Away



Unknown. "[Facebook](#)." 17/5/2015 via wikimedia. Creative Commons Attribution- Sharealike License.

There are currently [1.94 billion](#) active Facebook users. That is a lot of people with a lot of different connections. But that is just one social media site. There are also sites such as twitter, LinkedIn, and instagram; this doesn't even include news sources. What if we could use those kind of worldwide connections for more than just posting pictures with friends or updating statuses?

In 2012, Facebook set up an [organ donor status](#) on the user's' profile page. This brought up the option to become an organ donor which had a positive effect on the number of registered organ donors.

While some people and groups are for pro using social media to match up organ donors and recipients because it can increase the potential to save more lives, other individuals and groups still believe that recipients should be selected by a screening process and fancy algorithms are done to make the best match possible between donor and recipient and keep the order the laws have provided thus far.

What was a motivating factor for Facebook to do this?

Within May of 2012, Facebook started off their organ donor status. This came out when the number of organ donors was decreasing and people were getting distressed. Before the Facebook movement really occurred, [children under the age of 12 were trying to get onto the adult organ transplant list](#). There are many more adult organs rather than child organs, so being on the adult transplant list increased the children's chances of getting the necessary transplant

surgery. This started another controversy about whether or not children should have preferential treatment over adults when receiving organs. Dr. Dorry Segev, a transplant specialist at Johns Hopkins Medical Center, claimed that [“Every choice that is made in transplantation in favor of one patient means the likely death on the list for another patient.”](#)

Facebook became involved when Sheryl Sandberg and a fellow college graduate of hers discussed the scary shortage of organ donations compared the number of people who needed organ transplants. This inspired her to help out in a big way. Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, was all for the idea since a good friend of his, Steve Jobs, got his life extended by a transplant surgery?

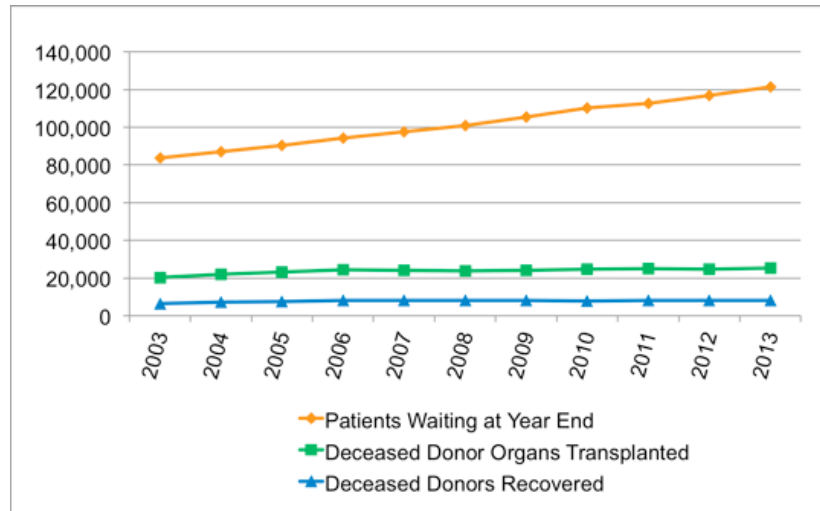
He knew how important a thing it is and was all too willing to help solve the issue. [Johns Hopkins’ researchers](#) on this particular topic, “see a 21- fold increase in a single day” of the number of organ donors registering. They see the benefits of increasing awareness, but how far should the use of social media go in the use of finding organ donors or promoting particular organ transplants.

In America, how exactly are the recipients matched up with the donors?

First, to become a donor, one must register in their state’s donor registry. This can be done when you get your driver’s license or the DMV anytime you change your mind about becoming an organ donor. If the deceased is registered as an organ donor, the local organ procurement (OPO) will contact the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network who then begin to search for a matching recipient who will best be suited for the available organ.

Next, an algorithm is used to determine the best recipient. This algorithm takes into account “blood type, tissue type, height, weight. The length of time the patient has been waiting, the severity of the patient’s illness, and the distance between the donor’s and the recipient’s hospitals.” ([U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#), 2015)

This allows doctors and other medical professionals to make sure the patient who receives the greatest benefits from the transplant will get the organ. This is a non-profit section of the government that tries to make sure that people have equal likelihood of getting their life saved through an organ transplant.



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. “[The Need Continues to Grow](#).” Unknown via transplant.hrsa.gov/. Subpart 27.4- rights in Data and Copyrights.

Why might using Facebook or any other social media site not be a good idea for selecting recipients?

The problem, though, with social media becoming too involved in organ donor- recipient decisions, is that the results of who gets the transplants becomes based more on who has the better story or is in the public eye more, instead of who might need it most or be a better match for the next donor. But the use of social media and a good story was enough to get Sarah Murnaghan a new lung, an 11 year old girl whose parents sued in order for her to get on the adult transplant list. This was an instance where the story played a big role in getting Murnaghan the transplant surgery she needed. The problem, though, is that every really needs the transplant surgery if they are on the “list,” and this could have been considered unfair to the people who have been waiting on the list longer than Murnaghan was and have yet to get their lung transplant.

According to W. Eckart (2015), a professor at the Institute for the History and Ethics of Medicine at the University of Heidelberg in Germany, claims that opening the organ transplantation process would lead to disorder and also went on to state “authorities could not control the arrangements between donors and recipients... and the likelihood that money is being paid could increase with this arrangement.” (Eckart, 2015) There is a system in place in the [Eurotransplant](#) Company (a non profit organization similar to Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network in charge of Germany, the Netherlands, Croatia as well as other European countries) that has a governing board of doctors that chooses recipients and donors to match depending upon urgency, and other qualifications.

When this process moves to social media, it becomes a much more random process where people with more Facebook friends or have the more compelling story get a better chance of

getting an organ donor. Finally, not all people have a social media page and/or are interested in being apart of the online community. This poses a huge disadvantage for a fraction of the population that needs the organ transplants just as much as the other fraction.

What are the benefits of using social media in finding organ donors?

The main objective of doing organ transplants is saving lives. By using social media, the number of potential donors can increase the number of lives saved. In America, your body is considered to be your own property, so if you want to donate an organ to someone particular before you die, that is your right. This would work in the case of donating kidneys. This is an opportunity where Facebook relations can be a valuable resource. If someone is willing to donate you their kidney, you get pushed to the top of the line.

Also, the more strict the regulations are on how donating transactions occurs, the less number of available donors there are. For example, for the Eurotransplant, in order to receive a donation from a living donor, you have to have a personal relationship with them. This is restrictive for the recipient in finding a donor. If finding donors on Facebook became an options, they would be able screen for particular traits and characteristics of donors necessary for their own body. [Eurotransplant](#) has 1248 people on the transplant waiting list of January 2015 and in 2014, there were all of 967 organs transplanted. The total population of the nations within the Eurotransplant exchange are 11,204,000 people.

This becomes a bigger problem in countries that have stricter rules on organ donors. In America, if you are alive, you have the opportunity to donate your kidney to whomever you want. It is your property. But in other countries, living donors can only transplant to people they are really close with, not stangers they met on Facebook. The Facebook effect on American people may influence other nations to change their own customs of how they pick donors and recipients. Certain parts of their current system can remain, but the change in technology can lead to other changes, since it opens new doors for communication.

There are a good deal of success stories by the use of Facebook. One example of such success story is Anthony Stokes, a 15 year old boy in need of a heart transplant. He was turned down for being put on the transplant list because of the vague concerns about “noncompliance.” His family got him coverage on TV and other media site and the story ended up going viral. After the news spread, he was put on the transplant list and received a [new heart a week later](#). This is one benefit that social media can provide. It gives people a second chance to get the life saving operation they need.



U.S. Army Medical Command photo. "[Surgery](#)." 3/2003 via wikimedia. Public Domain.

Who is in favor of having organ transplant arrangements made via social media?

Obviously Facebook agrees that using social media for matching organ donors with organ recipients is a good idea. Facebook wants their company to continue increasing the awareness of organ donations, but the idea has morphed into something more.

Another group in support of social media becoming a bigger player is the United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS) as they have correlated the openness of finding organ donors and a means to save more lives. That is their overall goal in the end, to save as many lives as possible. Executive producer. Walter Green said in an interview that it is hard to hide the facts that as soon as Facebook made organ donor statuses a big deal, a large number of new people registered to be an organ donor. He supports that the issue is not always on the tops of everyone's' minds and needs to be addressed.

Another organization that is for the use of more social media in this issue is the Johns Hopkins College of Medicine. They believe that if Facebook had such a dramatic difference the first time that the movement should continue to live on. Online fads always come and go so quickly, but he is trying to make the need for organ donors stick in people's minds just like another tweet or Facebook post their friend might have drawn. A. M. Cameron, M.D., Ph. D.(2013), an associate professor of surgery at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, claimed that " If we can harness that excitement in the long term, then we can really start to move the needle on the big picture. The need for donor organs vastly outpaces the available supply and this could be a way to change that equation." (Cameron, 2013) He was also the study head for the effects of social media on organ donations.

Who is against the use of social media for finding organ donors?

The [Eurotransplant](#) organization is still against the use of Facebook to find organ donors. This goes against their code and policy, as they believe that recipients should be selected in reference to a certain algorithm and judged by a team of doctors and other medical specialists who have been trained to know the different variables that go into doing transplants. Their goal is to optimize the use of donor organs. The way they think is best to find the best match between recipient and donor is to match them up themselves. When the people themselves get involved in the process, it becomes a lot messier and less equal in the process.

The speakers for this group are the countries that are involved under their policies. These countries include Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, Croatia, Luxembourg, Hungary and Croatia

What are the real feelings behind these two arguments?

The people and groups that believe Facebook is a new frontier in finding organ donors see the evolution in technology and are willing to embrace it. They are probably more comfortable with technology and or have had a personal experience where they were, or someone they knew was, impacted in a positive way by social media. These people seem to think with more of their emotions rather than more logic based ideas. Although the number of organ donors was on the rise after Facebook released the “organ donor status,” that does not necessarily mean that people were using social media to find the donors, but just motivating people to become organ donors.

Individuals or groups that are against social media becoming a bigger part of organ donor recipient match ups see the benefits of the system we have in place now. They are the more logical thinkers that know how people can manipulate a system if given enough power to do so. These are the people that thrive when given the chance to do things themselves. They see the whole picture rather than just the immediate benefits from social media movements of people trying to get organ donors, or get put on the organ transplant list. If an individual receives enough media attention, non profits don't want to seem heartless by not giving a 15 year old a new heart for example. But the big picture is that so many people need organ transplants. It is a temporary victory for the minds of the people that a young, innocent child got a new chance at life. This is a hard topic to look objectively at. it is very emotional when someone's life literally hangs in the balance.

What sources can you trust the best then?

Any time you look at a site produced by the government or a respectable medical program it becomes mostly reliable. Usually research is done to support the ideas that they are saying. For example, the Johns Hopkins site is reliable since they did their own research in order to support their claims.

Overall, it is a hard call to make. Both sides give good points. Is it worth bringing more corruption into another system that might save some more lives? Or is it the best option to keep the system as it is and use Facebook just as a motivator to get people to register to become an organ donor?