

STATEMENT

Organ Donation and Transplantation and the COVID-19 pandemic

EU National Competent Authorities on Organ donation and transplantation, June 2020

Substantial decline in organ donation and transplant activities

Around 34 thousand solid organ transplants are performed in the European Union (EU) annually, allowing a gradually increasing number of patients to benefit from the “gift of life”. Much has been achieved over recent years thanks to strong support from policy makers at national and European level and collaborative efforts of professionals and authorities.

The EU Member States, under rotating EU Council presidencies, have repeatedly highlighted the importance of EU level cooperation in the field of transplantation¹. An EU Action Plan on Organ donation and transplantation, developed with the EU network of National Competent Authorities, has improved access, made transplant systems more efficient and set common EU quality and safety standards.² These efforts needed further enhancement and EU Council presidencies have continued to put transplant medicine as one of their health policy priorities.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on organ donation and transplantation in the EU. It has disrupted these actions and significantly reduced donation and transplant activities across the EU. Some Member States have observed reductions in activity as high as 80%. In many countries, transplants from deceased donors have been limited to high urgency situations and transplants from living donations have been put on hold during the critical period of the outbreak. This has resulted in lost opportunities for the more than 60 thousand vulnerable patients on the European transplant waiting lists.

Challenges in the field of organ donation and transplantation

Several drivers beyond the dramatic reduction in activity can be identified including a decrease in the pool of potential deceased organ donors, saturation of health-care systems and of the intensive care unit capacity, concerns for the increased COVID-19 related risks for living donors and the transplant population.

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on organisational aspects and several challenges have further complicated the organ donation and transplantation pathways: limited access to donor and recipient testing for SARS-CoV-2, lack of personal protective equipment, managerial challenges in donor hospitals and transplant centres, as well as in challenges in travel/transport logistics for retrieval teams and donated organs.

Many healthcare professionals with a critical role in donation and essential for transplant activities, in particular those working in intensive care units, have been redeployed to front-line work in the fight against COVID-19.

Some professional societies have highlighted concerns on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on organ donation and transplantation.³ Many of the issues highlighted above are relevant also to the transplantation of other substances of human origin, in particular hematopoietic stem cells.⁴

Needs at national and EU level

In order to foster recovery of donation and transplant programmes and to be prepared for possible future outbreaks, the National Competent Authorities on organ donation and transplantation call for support to address a set of specific actions needed at national and EU level:

¹ Spain (2010), Cyprus (2011) and Poland (2012). Croatia EU Council Presidency - 1st half of 2020

² https://ec.europa.eu/health/blood_tissues_organ/organ_en

³ European Society for Organ Transplantation (ESOT)

⁴ <https://www.ebmt.org/covid-19-and-bmt>

- Organise comprehensive local care pathways for transplant patients, including in designated COVID-free transplant centres and hospital settings for donation and peri-transplant management. Support the use of tele-medicine for pre- and post-transplant (and pre- and post-living donation) care. Such pathways can be organised jointly for other vulnerable patient groups, such as cancer patients.
- Streamline harmonized safety and quality protocols and standards across Member States, also to allow for the cross-border exchange of organs. This is possible through guidance, such as that from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) on testing protocols for SARS-CoV-2, which has been very helpful for the transplant sector.
- Ensure priority access to adequate microbiological testing for donors and recipients.
- Facilitate logistics, including those required for cross-border exchange of organs and travel.
- Support the implementation of organ preservation technologies that allow longer ex-vivo time windows to facilitate transplants when logistics are more complex, e.g. in the case of local outbreaks.
- Ensure an adequate supply of devices and medicines essential for transplant programmes.
- Implement digital solutions for EU-wide data collection and monitoring of post-transplant outcomes and vigilance. Strengthen and support set-up and implementation of national and EU transplant registries, such as those developed under the EU-funded EDITH project⁵.
- Strengthen capacities and skills of critical care professionals, donor coordinators, transplant professionals, organ procurement organisations and/or inter/national transplant organisations to deal with these changes and challenges. Encourage health professionals to effectively communicate on the impact of the pandemic to patients.
- Strengthen common research to answer questions on the effects of communicable diseases on transplantation.

A call for collaborative action

The EU National Competent Authorities for Organs call on policy makers to take account of these needs in the anticipated system reform of healthcare at national level, and to invest⁶ in the actions laid out above. The authorities call also for reinforced EU level cooperation and support and propose that EU level support mechanisms for health, such as the proposed EU4Health programme⁷ and other EU support mechanisms for research, digitalization, structural reform, regional development and education be used to the maximum to deliver solutions in the area of organ transplantation.

Such continued support and engagement of policy makers, jointly with authorities and professionals, will ensure preparedness with more effective, accessible and resilient transplant programmes and increased opportunities for transplantation and cure for EU citizens.

⁵ <https://edith-project.eu/>

⁶ Investments in kidney transplantation bring savings for the overall healthcare budget on kidney replacement therapies – EDITH study.

⁷ EU4Health – a vision for a safer and healthier European Union 2021-2027 https://ec.europa.eu/health/funding/eu4health_en
Cf Annex I: “to strengthen national health systems” including “support capacity building of national systems for the implementation of legislation on substances of human origin, and for the promotion of the sustainable and safe supply of such substances through networking activities”.