

Body shop: The human tissue industry

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Deciding to donate one's organs and tissues for transplant after death is as morally mainstream an action as one can think of these days. Every state encourages people to use the back of their driver's licenses to register as an organ donor. The highly publicized sagas of sports figures Mickey Mantle and Walter Payton, who died while awaiting organs for transplant, sparked widespread calls for more donors. One of the leading spokesperson for the cause is Michael Jordan.

But all is not well in the body parts business. For one thing, it is a business. Though federal law bans the buying and selling of human organs and tissues, companies are allowed to recover "reasonable costs," which amount to millions of dollars. This provision, unattached to further regulation, has allowed a commercial industry to develop. The *Orange County Register* reported this spring that the two largest for-profit companies dealing in body parts had \$1.4 million in sales last year. And it's a growing industry. The *Register* estimated that in a few years the total revenues of such companies will reach \$1 billion.

These businesses rely on people's desire to help those in need. But when a family gives permission for the removal of tissues and organs from a loved one who has died, it does not imagine it is providing raw material for a profit-making industry. Nor is the family likely to know that many of the parts removed are used not in life-saving transplant operations but in more mundane medical procedures. Tendons are used in knee surgeries, bits of bone in orthopedic operations, and skin in cosmetic surgeries—including face lifts, penis enlargements and lip enhancements.

In the wake of reports like the *Register's* the U.S. government this month announced plans to probe the tissue bank industry: it will investigate how tissue is used and what donor families are being told. Tighter regulations and greater honesty are clearly needed if the industry is to retain its credibility. People who are happy to offer their heart to save a life are not necessarily eager to donate their skin to puff

up someone's lips—or someone else's bank account.

The *Chicago Tribune* recently estimated that all the usable tissue in a human body has a market value of over \$230,000. A friend observed, half jokingly, that donors may start seeking a tax write-off on that amount. Or perhaps donors will start offering their bodies for a price—the next logical step in the commodification of the body.

Years ago, when organ transplants were just on the medical horizon, ethicist Paul Ramsey expressed the fear that the “harvesting” of organs would further distance human beings from their bodies. He worried that we would come to see the body not as integral to a person but as a collection of useful parts, to be manipulated for utilitarian purposes and commercial gain. It was not an idle worry. The commodification of the body is well under way. Therefore, while Christians exercise the legitimate, noble wish to donate their organs and tissues to others, they must continue to think hard about what it means to respect the body—dead as well as alive. We suspect that the way we treat the bodies of the dead is inevitably linked to how we treat the bodies of the living.