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Hollywood gets it wrong in organ donation, new research shows

Inaccuracies in television storylines may cost lives.

Donation groups unite to work with Hollywood

LOS ANGELES, CA — New research from Purdue University provides the most comprehensive study of organ donation storylines on television and shows that **Hollywood is getting it wrong and possibly costing lives.**

"During 2004 and 2005, organ donation appeared as a primary storyline on entertainment television in more than 80 television episodes in medical dramas, police shows, comedy and daytime soap operas," said Dr. Susan Morgan, associate professor of health communication at Purdue University and author of *Entertainment (Mis)Education*. "We found that **none of these appearances presented organ donation in an accurate or positive light.**"

The most commonly portrayed inaccuracies are black markets for organs, doctors not saving a potential donor's life, organs being stolen from people and people with money receive higher priority on waiting lists, finds Dr. Morgan.

Dr. Morgan's follow-up study, *The Power of Narratives*, goes a step further and reveals that **inaccurate storylines about organ and tissue donation stop people from registering as organ donors.**

"Professor Morgan's research has encouraged us to put Hollywood on alert," said Tenaya Wallace, director of Donate Life Hollywood, a campaign to eliminate the "stolen-kidney" storyline and other inaccuracies from television and film. "The organ and tissue donation and transplant community has been upset by inaccuracies in the past but we have not taken action. Now we have hard evidence that what viewers think about donation is directly related to what they see in television storylines. This is not just about creative license. We want Hollywood writers, producers and executives to consider the public health impact of their donation storylines. That is why **we are launching Donate Life Hollywood.**"

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Viewers, especially those who had not decided if they would register as donors, were highly influenced by what they saw on TV and, unlike televised sex and violence, **the public does not see a difference between Hollywood storylines and reality** due to a lack of information to counter what they have learned about donation on television. This is likely to prevent some people from joining their state's donor registry.

Since 1993, more than 40 states have established donor registries to authorize the donation of organs, eyes and tissue after death. With donor registries becoming a vital tool to save lives there is growing concern within the donation community about the influence that entertainment has on the willingness of people to sign up as organ donors.

"Our goal is to get people to take action now and register as an organ and tissue donor on their state donor registry," said David Fleming, executive director of Donate Life America, which creates national donor awareness campaigns that are implemented locally. **"If a TV show can stop someone from taking this action, then it can cost lives."**

Dr. Morgan concludes her research with recommendations that the donation community work more closely with the entertainment industry and become more assertive to counter inaccurate portrayals of organ donation in the mass media.

"Over 35 donation and transplant organizations across the country have already signed on to Donate Life Hollywood since June 15th," said Wallace, "and more are joining every day."

Donation storylines have appeared in medical and crime dramas like *CSI: NY*, *Numb3rs*, *House*, and *Grey's Anatomy* as well as in comedies such as *Scrubs* and the *George Lopez Show*. ***Heartland***, the first television show focusing entirely on the donation and transplant process debuted on TNT in June 2007. The main characters are transplant surgeons and an organ procurement coordinator.

"Hollywood is looking for drama and inspiration." said Wallace. "We understand that is why shows are increasingly turning to donation and transplantation as a storylines."

Donate Life Hollywood will share real-life stories of donation and a Top 10 list of **storylines that are most harmful** to the public's perception of the donation process with writers, producers and network executives. If television shows, movies or commercials contain any of the Top 10, then Donate Life Hollywood will mobilize groups and individuals touched by donation to write letters. They will also offer praise when a show is accurate and inspirational.

"Similar efforts made a difference for how HIV and AIDS were treated in film and television in the 1980s, and breast cancer before that. Today, it also can make a difference in how organ donation is depicted," Dr. Morgan said.

Over 96,000 people are waiting for transplants and many will not receive a transplant in time. Hearts, kidneys, livers, lungs, pancreases, and small intestines can be transplanted along with many types of tissue, including corneas, heart valves and bone.

For more information on research on how television impacts the public's perception of donation, contact Dr. Susan Morgan at (765) 494-9108, semorgan@purdue.edu

"Entertainment (Mis)Education: The Framing of Organ Donation in Entertainment Television" will be published in *Health Communication* in August 2007 and looks at programs aired on ABC, NBC, CBS, and FOX.

http://www.purdue.edu/dp/rche/donatelife/Entertainment_miseducation.pdf

"The power of narratives: The effect of organ donation storylines on the attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors of donors and non-donors." was presented to the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, San Francisco in May 2007.

http://www.purdue.edu/dp/rche/donatelife/Power_of_Narratives.pdf

Donate Life Hollywood (DLH) is a campaign to eliminate the "stolen-kidney" storyline and other inaccuracies from television and film. It is supported by donation and transplant organizations from across the country and is administered through OneLegacy in Los Angeles.

For more information on Donate Life Hollywood, contact campaign director Tenaya Wallace at (213) 400-2702, twallace@onelegacy.org.

Note to Journalists:

A publication-quality photograph of Susan Morgan is available at <http://news.uns.purdue.edu/images/+2006/morgan-organ.jpg>.

Related Research:

"Family discussions about organ donation: how the media influences opinions about donation decisions" was published in *Clinical Transplantation*, 19(5) 674-682, in 2005.

http://www.purdue.edu/dp/rche/donatelife/Family_Discussions_Organ_Donation.pdf

Related news release:

Hollywood organ donation myths challenged at the workplace

<http://www.purdue.edu/UNS/html4ever/2006/060411.Morgan.organ.html>

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