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[An ethically defensible market in organs? It depends...](#)

It was not clear in your recent editorial whether the proposed market in human organs would involve the sale of rights to organs which are subsequently exercised by the purchaser upon death of the vendor or alternatively, the sale of organs from live donors. This clearly is a very important distinction with major economic and ethical consequences and thus should have been addressed explicitly. The former involves the transfer of organs only once they no longer have use value to the donor. Although some of the issues of quality (organ) and the crowding out of altruism that concerned Titmuss a number of years ago in relation to payment for blood donation may also be relevant here, ¹ it nonetheless avoids the serious ethical problem outlined below.

In the latter, a transfer of a healthy organ occurs from individual A to individual B based on A's willingness to accept a specified payment for that product. Given that the poor will inevitably have a lower minimum willingness to accept threshold, the proposal will in essence promote a general redistribution of healthy organs from the poor to non-poor. This would occur despite, as stated by the authors, 'no direct purchasing' by B, because ultimately the organs will tend to be sourced from the poor. Furthermore, the incentives created by such markets along with weak regulation, as seen in some developing countries, can potentially undermine safety and create conditions for the exploitation of those in greatest economic need.

1. Titmuss RM. The gift relationship from human blood to social policy. London: Allen & Unwin 1970

Competing interests: No competing interests

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