

The Australian Shortfall in transplants



Organ and tissue donations and transplants fell short of the target last year.

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The number of Australians receiving organ transplants declined last year despite a record number of deceased donors, and the system faces another review intended to address underlying legal, practical and resourcing issues.

In its annual report, tabled this week, the Organ and Tissue Authority confirmed it was unable to achieve last year's goals in the rate of organ transplant recipients, deceased organ donors and registered consent to organ donation. Although the number of deceased organ donors, 510, was higher than the 2016 figure of 503, and a record, the rate per million population was 20.7 donors, largely unchanged from the previous year and short of the target of 23.

The number of transplant recipients decreased from 1447 to 1402. The rate per million population was 57, below the 2016 result of 60 and well short of the goal of 65.

“While the national program has delivered substantial growth in our donation and transplantation rates over the last nine years, we acknowledge that there is more to be done,” authority chairman Mal Washer writes.

“With around 1400 Australians currently on organ transplant waiting lists, a further 11,000 people on dialysis, and increasing demand for tissue transplants, many more people could benefit from transplantation.”

The Weekend Australian previously revealed the medium-term increase in organ donors and transplant recipients had put the health system under significant pressure and exposed cracks between the states that might disadvantage patients.

There also have been delays with a long-awaited national allocation system, OrganMatch, which was due at the end of June but now is not likely to be operational before April next year.

Amid concerns over bottlenecks and inequity, particularly for indigenous people, the federal government launched a review of organ donation, retrieval and transplantation that also will examine the states’ concerns over resourcing.

The Council of Australian Governments Health Council backed the move and has since agreed to seek an Australian Law Reform Commission inquiry into human tissue laws. The authority noted a decrease in tissue donations last year compared with 2016, and the disappointing number of transplant recipients.

There are reviews at both ends of the organ and tissue donation and transplantation system, and previous work, including a review of the eye and tissue sector, is likely to result in significant reforms for the COAG Health Council to consider next year and beyond.

Last year, about 30 per cent of retrievals and 20 per cent of organ transplantations occurred across jurisdictions, yet policies and practices in

relation to waiting lists differed between states and territories, according to documents obtained by *The Weekend Australian*.

“Since 2009, the number of deceased organ donors has increased by 106 per cent and the number of transplant recipients by 75 per cent,” documents state.

“This increased activity is placing significant pressure on downstream resources and workforce planning for organ retrieval and transplant services.”

The organ review also will consider whether Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are at a disadvantage.

A recent study in *The Medical Journal of Australia* found indigenous people on dialysis were “substantially less likely” than other Australians to be placed on the waiting list for a kidney.

Health ministers at the last COAG Health Council meeting agreed on the need for human tissue laws to be up to date, consistent, and not impeding rates of organ and tissue donation. The tissue review will complement the organ review.

“A national review is timely to ensure modernisation and harmonisation legislation across the jurisdictions to support a consistent and responsive framework for human tissue donation, transplantation, address deficiencies and use for therapeutic purposes, education and research,” the ministers said in a communique.

The need for a tissue review has been raised through several forums since 2003. In 2016, consultant PricewaterhouseCoopers was engaged by the authority and reported on the need for harmonisation.

“Tissue donation, banking and transplantation is not governed by a national policy framework,” PwC reported at the time. “Each state-based legislative framework differs, and contains inconsistencies and ambiguity that don’t reflect change in the sector. Notably, this is reflected in the inability of legislation to remain current to technology and changing practices within the sector.”

The authority will continue its own rolling review, in anticipation of further reforms. “The board is committed to continuous review of the

OTA’s work program to ensure that approaches and projects are applicable and relevant to the individual health systems and communities that support them,” Washer writes in the authority’s annual report.

“The board is confident that further increases in organ and tissue donation and transplantation require the continued delivery of clinical practice improvement and the involvement of trained donation specialists in family donation conversations. In addition, members of the community at large need to convert their willingness to donate into registration and family discussion. These strategic directions will continue to be a priority in 2018-19.”

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