

Organ Transplants for Dogs

Where Do Dog Owners and Veterinarians Draw the Line?

"The dilemma is very real," said Richard Walshaw, BVMS, professor of small animal surgery in the College of Veterinary Medicine at Michigan State University in East Lansing, a surgeon with an interest in biomedical ethics. "In other countries, such as England, no one would ever consider doing a kidney transplant in pets. Why should you take the kidney out of a healthy pet?"

But many ethicists are happy with the solution to kidney transplants that has been adopted in the United States. "We will not do a transplant unless the donor will get adopted by the recipient's owner," Dr. Walshaw said. "This means two lives are saved, rather than one lost to kidney disease and one to euthanasia."

Ethical problems are greater for transplants such as the liver and heart because the entire organ is replaced, and the donor has none to spare. Dr. Gregory's team is attempting to use partial-liver transplants in dogs, which will allow both recipient and donor to live normally - a technique successful in humans.

The heart, however, is different. "I don't think heart transplantation will be a feasible alternative in [veterinary medicine] because of the donor problem," Dr. Gregory said. Dr. Walshaw agreed: "It's unacceptable to kill a healthy dog just to use his heart, and it's not feasible to collect organs from brain-dead animals, as done in human medicine." In a normal veterinary setting, it's simply not practical to keep a dog's heart beating and the organs filled with blood by artificial means after brain death, as is done in human hospitals. Indeed, most veterinary hospitals don't even have the equipment necessary to recognize brain death in dogs. Veterinarians usually recognize death only when the heart stops beating and breathing stops irrevocably - much too late for harvesting useful organs.