

## Transplant Tourism from Japan to China

By Yukiharu Takahashi

I am a freelance journalist in Japan. In 2007, I started to investigate the banning of restored kidney transplants<sup>1</sup> by the Japan Society for Transplantation without proper grounding. My research on transplant tourism from Japan to China started in 2010, and in 2015, I interviewed a staff member at a mediating organization arranging transplants for Japanese patients to China.

### Three Japanese recipients from China

I interviewed three recipients face to face who had operations in China between April and June, 2018.

They all stayed in Tianjin city, China, and had operations at the Oriental Organ Transplant Centre, at the First Central Hospital, between August and November, 2013. One had a liver and the other two had kidney transplants.

When they arrived, five other patients had been waiting for their transplant operations at their hotel, and one of them passed away straight after their liver transplantation.

The costs of operations at the time in 2013 were ¥20 million (about US\$200,000) for kidney and a range of ¥30 million (about US\$300,000) for a liver.<sup>2</sup>

In August 2018, a staff member at a mediating organization (who acts as a broker) I investigated stated “the trend in the cost of transplants is increasing every year by several million yen.”

Three recipients I interviewed were told by a staff member of the mediating organization (the same one I investigated) that the waiting period would be about two weeks. However, they ended up waiting for three months. They don't know the exact reason for the delay, though they speculated that some political movements in China affected them.

They went to China for transplants despite of the high fees, because it had been almost impossible to have transplants in Japan. The waiting time for a liver transplant is 15 years in Japan.

Once a patient decides to have a transplant in China, he/she pays a requested amount to

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<sup>1</sup> “Restored kidney transplantation” refers to an operation where a patient suffering from chronic kidney failure receives a ‘restored’ kidney — meaning, a kidney that was removed from a living patient as a means of treatment of certain kinds of cancer. The cancerous portion of the explanted kidney is then removed on the operating bench, and transplanted to the new patient.

<sup>2</sup> The liver recipient did not tell me the exact cost, but indicated a rough figure.

their mediating organization. This is the starting point of everything. In a Japanese hospital designated by the mediating organization, the patient's blood sample is taken, and HLA and blood type are examined beforehand, and the information is sent to China.

The two-week waiting time quoted by the mediating organization sounds reasonable, because the recipients' conditions and their necessary data for the transplants are sent to the Chinese hospital beforehand, providing enough time for them to select a matching donor in China.

The mediating organization used to be informed by their Chinese contact if the organ was from a death-row prisoner. Later, "organs from Beijing" became the commonly used euphemism, implying they were from death-row prisoners. When the three recipients arrived in Tianjin, there were five other Japanese recipients waiting for their operations. The three recipients realized that operations using "organs from Beijing" tend to be carried out around midnight by observing the operation arrangements of the recipients waiting before them.

The liver operation for one of the three recipients started at around 8pm. He was in an acute condition, facing to death. He had an operation immediately after being informed an organ was available. From conversations with his interpreter and medical staff, this recipient had an impression that the donor was suddenly killed in a traffic accident.

The kidney used for one of the recipients was donated from a 37 year-old man, so the hospital told him. He thought that the kidney must have come from a death-row prisoner based on the young age, but he did not dare to confirm it.

Another recipient who had a kidney operation was told by a representative of the mediating organization that the donor was a death-row prisoner. He felt relieved when the mediating organization told him that a part of his payment would be paid to the prisoner's family.

### **Recipients from China Face Refusal of Aftercare from Hospitals in Japan**

Japanese recipients coming back from China face the reality of "refusal by hospitals" for aftercare in Japan. When the recipients I interviewed left the Chinese hospital, they were prescribed with enough immunosuppressant medicine for three weeks. Two recipients who had kidney transplants visited F hospital in City A in Shizuoka for a check-up after the operation, treatment, and prescription of immunosuppressant medicine. They were told by the head of the hospital (at that time), Dr. T that "You are criminals. I will report you to the police." Dr. T is known as a former executive of the Japanese Society for Transplant.

Cases like these have occurred in several hospitals.

As a matter of fact, a kidney recipient from China filed an appeal against Hamamatsu

Medical University Hospital (in Hamamatsu-city, Sizuoka, Japan) for their refusal of medical treatment.<sup>3</sup>

Some doctors are treating recipients from China, believing that the recipients should be looked after on a humanitarian basis despite of having critical views against transplant tourism.

### **Lifting the Ban on Restored Kidney Transplant, and Statement at Meeting**

On 13<sup>th</sup> September, 2018, a meeting to report the lifting of the ban on restored kidney transplantation by the “All Party Association of Restored Kidney Transplant”, which consists of ruling and opposition MPs, was held at the Building for Members of Councillors (the Upper House) in Tokyo. Four MPs and members of the Japan Society for Transplantation, including Professor Hiroto Egawa, Chair of the Board of Trustees, the Japan Society for Transplantation, attended the meeting.

Restored kidney transplantation is a technique developed by doctors led by Dr. Makoto Mannami of Uwajima Hospital (Tokushu Medical Association) in Japan. However, in 2007, five related medical associations led by the Japan Society for Transplantation declared the operation as “not medically appropriate”, and banned the operation “on principle”.

However, the practice has been an accepted and established treatment in the US and Europe. In July 2018, the Japanese Ministry of Health and Labour recognised the practice as an advanced medical treatment so that it can be partially covered by medical insurance.

Through banning the practice from 2007 till 2018, a numbers of kidney transplant opportunities had to be missed out in Japan.<sup>4</sup> The banning may have contributed Japanese patients to go abroad for kidney transplantations in places such as in China.

At that meeting, Professor Egawa admitted the fact that doctors are saying to the transplant recipients from China that “we will see you if you don’t mind us reporting you to the police”. After the meeting, to find out his real motive behind the above statement about reporting patients to the police, I asked Professor Egawa directly. He replied “this is to stop patients going to China.”

He intends to prevent Japanese from going abroad for transplantation by spreading the information widely that there would be no hospitals in Japan who would look after the

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nishinippon.co.jp/nnp/medical/article/281777>

"*Refusal of medical treatment is illegal: A man who had kidney transplant in China appealed*" on Nishi-Nippon Newspaper dated 14<sup>th</sup> October, 2016. (Original text with English translation inserted.)

<sup>4</sup> The number of usable kidneys being discarded due to the banning was estimated by Professor Hiroshi Tsutsumi in 2007, based on his analysis of the operations of removing cancerous cells from kidneys in Hiroshima Prefecture. His research was issued in “*Microscopia*” (Autumn Issue, 2007). Back number can be purchased: (The contents indicate the restored kidney transplant was featured in this issue): <http://www.kokodo.co.jp/pub/shopping/naiyou.asp?ISBN=243>

recipients from China. This is creating anxiety, fear, intimidation among patients who wish to go abroad for transplants. This is far from making appropriate efforts to improve the situation of organ transplantation in Japan.

### **Remuneration to Doctors**

Several transplant mediating organizations are active on the internet, and arrange transplants in China for Japanese patients. Sometimes patients get information via word of mouth from other recipients who had transplants in China. Also, in some cases, doctors themselves, who learnt about a mediating organization, contact the mediator to confirm if they can arrange transplants in China. It appears that most of them are urologists or dialysis doctors.

In October 2015, the mediating organization I interviewed told me that “When patients introduced by those doctors come back from China after having transplants there, most doctors contact us and ask for a kickback.”

This mediating organization has been paying “honorarium” to those doctors by handing out cash without any receipts, avoiding to leave evidences. Doctors won’t declare it to the tax office, regarding the cash as remuneration outside medical provisions.<sup>5</sup>

The current Japanese situation of a severe shortage of organs for transplant operations is making transplantation into a business.

### **Summary**

The Japan Society for Transplantation shows no indication of drastic reform plan. They banned restored kidney operations for 11 years, which made it inevitable that potential recipients would go to China.

They intimidate recipients from China by saying “we will report you to the police” and create an environment where recipients from China suffer from being refused medical care

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<sup>5</sup> The organization was investigated for unreported tax on income from transplant abroad which amounts about ¥60 million (about US\$600,000) in 2011. The organization revealed to me that in order to protect the names of the doctors, they paid penalties to the tax office. I was also told that this was not a large expense for them, considering potential income through doctors who introduce their patients.

after operations. Spreading this sort of information is their attempt at stopping transplant tourism from Japan.

Meanwhile, there are doctors who introduce their patients to a mediating organization, and ask for a kickback when their patients come back from China. These doctors are urologists and dialysis doctors.

The world of Japanese transplant medicine is extremely distorted. There is no sign of it being corrected.