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SINOSPHERE

Choice of Hong Kong for Organ Transplant Meeting Is Defended

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HONG KONG — Organizers have defended the choice of Hong Kong as the site for a global conference on transplants, saying it did not signify international acceptance of China’s transplant system, which long relied on organs from executed prisoners. Chinese officials say that they are overhauling the system, and that the use of prisoners’ organs has ended.

“The meeting in Hong Kong is not a ‘coming out’ for Chinese transplantation,” Dr. Philip O’Connell, president of the Transplantation Society, which is holding the meeting this week, and Dr. Jeremy Chapman, editor in chief of *Transplantation*, the society’s journal, and a former president, wrote in a joint email on Thursday.

“Organ donation reform in China is a major global issue and T.T.S.” — the society — “has been and will remain the strongest antagonist to the use of executed prisoner organs,” they wrote. They added that Hong Kong was chosen in part because a military coup made the first choice of Thailand “impractical.”

An article published on Wednesday in the *American Journal of Transplantation* criticized the choice of Hong Kong, saying it was impossible to verify that China had followed through on its promises to change its organ system from one dependent on executed prisoners to one based on voluntary donations, and therefore it was too early to hold such a meeting on Chinese soil.

Doing so risks losing the only leverage the world has over China — a

longstanding academic boycott that China is eager to lift, said the authors, who included members of Doctors Against Forced Organ Harvesting, a nongovernmental organization that opposes involuntary organ extraction.

International medical organizations such as the World Medical Association and the Transplantation Society say the use of organs from prisoners in any country that has a death penalty violates medical ethical standards because the prisoners cannot freely give their consent.

Hong Kong, a former British colony that returned to Chinese rule in 1997, operates a transplant system separate from that of mainland China. It does not practice capital punishment, but the death penalty is widely used on the mainland.

“We were among the first to draw global attention to the practice through our work,” Dr. O’Connell and Dr. Chapman wrote in the email on Thursday, referring to the Chinese use of organs from prisoners.

The society “also remains committed to driving organ donation reform in China,” they wrote, adding, “We demand that the practice of using organs from executed prisoners is abolished forever.”

Hong Kong was chosen as the site for the conference in part because of Asia’s increasing importance in organ transplantation, but also out of necessity, the two wrote:

“We were scheduled to hold our meeting in Thailand but canceled that when the coup in that country made it impractical to hold our congress there.

“We investigated alternatives which included Seoul, Singapore and Hong Kong. Hong Kong was finally selected because the venue was available and it is a city in the center of Asia with the transport links and infrastructure to hold a meeting of this size.

“The last time the congress was held in Asia was in 1994 in Japan. Asia has the fastest-growing transplant programs in the world and countries such as South Korea, Japan and Taiwan are making major academic contributions to transplantation science and clinical practice.”

Dr. Jacob Lavee and his four co-authors of the article in the American Journal of Transplantation wrote that they had “ethical concerns” about 10 papers by Chinese scientists that are due to be presented at the meeting, which runs until Tuesday.

Dr. O’Connell and Dr. Chapman elaborated on the review process for articles that the society had already outlined on its website, saying that the society had carefully vetted submissions from China in a multistage process, requiring the authors to declare that no organs from executed prisoners were used.

The papers will be vetted one more time before they are presented in Hong Kong, they said. “These requirements will be reviewed prior to presentation,” they wrote, “and any presentation not conforming to our rules will be withdrawn by our organization.”

Dr. O’Connell and Dr. Chapman offered details on how many papers were submitted from China, and how many were rejected because of concerns over the sources of the organs, and saw progress over the past 10 years:

“Just under a decade ago, more than 160 clinical abstracts were submitted from China to our congress in Sydney and all were rejected.

“This year only 28 clinical papers were submitted, demonstrating that the policy of the society is very clear to those working in China.

“Of those 28, 10 were rejected immediately and a further two after we required further reconfirmation that the presentation contained no data from any executed prisoner organs.”

But the process depends on the honesty of the scientists involved, they wrote:

“We adhere to the uniform global academic standard that all authors of all papers are responsible for the truth of their presentations — it is the process for all of science.

“All scientific journals accept the statements made in papers, and all scientific conferences accept the statements made in abstracts. No societies or professional scientific organizations verify source data.

Plagiarism and fraud that is uncovered in any presentation is consequentially responded to seriously by the scientific community.”

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