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Asking how to act

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There are a number of obstacles to increasing the supply of cadaveric organs for transplantation. These include reluctance on the part of relatives to agree to the so called harvesting of organs from their deceased relative, and the unwillingness of some doctors to approach grieving families and ask consent for this harvesting to take place. In this paper I will focus on the altruistic act of asking that the latter entails, and will argue that failure to acknowledge the personal cost of this act to physicians is having an adverse impact on the supply of organs. I will draw analogies with the almost equally neglected altruistic act of undertaking anatomy dissection and all of the related breaking of societal taboos. I will examine the language used in discussions about increasing organ supply and conclude that the terms cadaveric and harvest are unhelpful in gaining public confidence. A process and vocabulary that openly acknowledges and validates the altruistic acts demanded of all the human beings involved-donors, recipients, their respective relatives, and the health professionals who mediate between them-is needed if the supply of organs is to be increased.

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