

ONLINE PROMOTION AND FACILITATION OF UNETHICAL INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL FOR TRANSPLANTATION

POSITION PAPER OF THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE ON ORGAN TRANSPLANTATION OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE (CD-P-TO) AND ITS NETWORK OF NATIONAL FOCAL POINTS ON TRAVEL FOR TRANSPLANTATION (NETTA)

Adopted by the European Committee on Organ Transplantation (CD-P-TO) on 9 October 2025 during its 34th plenary meeting in Kalamata, Greece.

The Council of Europe Committee on Organ Transplantation (CD-P-TO) and its Network of National Focal Points on Travel for Transplantation (NETTA) express their deep concern about the growing phenomenon of the online promotion and facilitation of unethical international travel for organ transplantation.

Recent media reports have revealed cases where online platforms and websites offer transplant tourism packages. Desperate patients are thus lured into unsafe and unlawful transplant procedures, in exchange for substantial fees, where vulnerable individuals are exploited as sources of organs.

Transplantation must always be grounded in transparency, equity and respect for human rights. Practices involving human trafficking for the purpose of organ removal (HTOR) and/or trafficking in human organs (THO) pose a serious threat to human rights and fundamental freedoms and constitute an affront to the notion of human dignity and personal liberty. They also pose a high risk to both the donor and the recipient, as well as to public health and healthcare systems, generating mistrust towards donation and transplantation, with a negative impact on altruistic donation.

We reaffirm the binding principles enshrined in the Council of Europe Conventions on Human Rights and Biomedicine [1], on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings [2] and against Trafficking in Human Organs [3], as well as the WHO Guiding Principles on Human Cell, Tissue and Organ Transplantation [4]. We also recall resolutions and recommendations from Council of Europe bodies [5-11], the Declaration of Istanbul on Organ Trafficking and Transplant Tourism [12] and the Santander Statement [13], which reiterate the principle of non-commercialisation of organ donation, as well as transparency, equity in access to organ transplantation, self-sufficiency and oversight as fundamental to transplant systems.

In view of these threats, Council of Europe member and non-member states and relevant authorities are urged to:

- strengthen oversight of online platforms that advertise or facilitate transplantation services;
- implement protocols and guidelines to enable faster communication between relevant entities (judiciary authorities, law enforcement authorities, health authorities, internet service providers and digital platforms) so cybercrime linked to transplantation activities can be swiftly detected, investigated and addressed;
- train national and international cybercrime agencies on transplant-related crimes to support surveillance activities and investigations, and include transplant-related crimes in cybercrime prevention plans with a variety of awareness activities;
- empower healthcare professionals by providing training on illicit transplantation practices, equipping them to guide patients in making informed decisions, and establishing clear reporting mechanisms for identifying online platforms offering suspicious transplantation services;
- enhance international co-operation via formal mechanisms such as NETTA, enabling systematic data sharing and monitoring of international travel for transplantation and early detection of illicit practices;
- develop targeted education initiatives for transplant candidates and the public to improve literacy regarding international travel for transplantation, including risks and liabilities linked to illicit practices, to discourage participation in unethical or unlawful transplant procedures abroad;
- become a party to the Council of Europe Convention against Trafficking in Human Organs [3], which is open to both member states of the Council of Europe and non-member states. This legal instrument, together with other international instruments criminalising human trafficking for organ removal (such as the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings [2] and the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons [14]), provides a comprehensive legal framework to prevent and combat organ trafficking and other illicit transplant activities that violate fundamental human rights.

All stakeholders – including governments, policy makers, international institutions, health authorities, law enforcement authorities and professional organisations – are urged to act jointly and decisively to address illicit transplant practices. Only through co-ordinated national and international efforts can we uphold ethical standards in transplantation, safeguard the health and dignity of both donors and recipients, protect public health and preserve the trust that underpins our healthcare systems.

References

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4. WHO Guiding Principles on Human Cell, Tissue and Organ Transplantation. Sixty-Third World Health Assembly, World Health Organization. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10561-010-9226-0>.
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