

Organ donations blocked by families

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Families block more than 100 organ donations every year by overruling the wishes of their loved ones.

Relatives' wishes have been respected over those of the dead despite them being registered donors in 505 cases over the past five years.

The figures were released to the BBC by NHS Blood and Transplant weeks after Theresa May announced that England would follow Wales in shifting to an opt-out system where people's organs can be used unless they specifically register an objection.

Mrs May told the Conservative Party conference that the move was necessary because 500 patients died last year through the lack of suitable donor organs and she wanted to "shift the balance of presumption" in favour of donation.

Under the Welsh system introduced last year, families cannot overrule the wishes of people who are registered donors but can prevent organs being used where they believe dead relatives would have objected.

Many registered donors will not be aware that family sensitivities can override their consent.

Laws on organ donation suggest that consent is given by the deceased but the wishes of relatives are respected. In practice, doctors do not use organs if families object strongly.

Figures published in January last year suggested that relatives blocked one in seven transplants.

In response, NHS Blood and Transplant said that it would no longer seek a family's formal consent to reduce the number of "overrides".

The British Medical Association has long campaigned for a switch to an opt-out system and praised Mrs May's decision as life-saving. Other patient groups also praised the change. Figures released last month showed 177 families refused to allow relatives' organs to be used last year as they were unsure of their wishes, potentially losing 460 organs. At the same time, 457 died on transplant waiting lists.

However, the effect of the opt-out system in Wales is still disputed. The Welsh government said last year that in the first six months of the scheme, half the 60 organs transplanted had come from people whose consent had been presumed. Yet critics say there is little sign of a surge in donation since the change came into effect. Last financial year the total number of transplants in Wales actually fell from 214 in 2015-16 to 187.

Chris Rudge, a former national transplant director, warned that the change could backfire if it undermined other efforts to boost donation, citing a backlash in Brazil that forced the country to abandon the opt-out model. "So far in Wales there is no sign it's made any difference at all," he said.