

Doctor's China transplants stir prisoner organ controversy

Kyodo News

A Japanese doctor who helped develop a new transplant method has taught the technique at a hospital in China that has come under international criticism for its use of organs from executed prisoners.

Ko Okumura, an immunology professor at Juntendo University in Tokyo, said Thursday he only cooperated with the hospital in eastern China for its experiments using monkeys.

"I think there are no problems as long as the tests are on animals," said Okumura, a key figure in developing a transplant method that can curb organ rejection without dependence on immune suppressors.

In the new method, a type of lymphatic cell called a "T-cell" is extracted from the bodies of both the donor and recipient, grown with a special antibody and then reinserted into the patient's body.

The new method weakens the immune strength of the transplanted organ but not the whole immune system itself, and can end the patient's dependence on immune-suppressing drugs in about a year.

In China, speculation is rife that the country continues to use organs removed from executed prisoners. Chinese media reported in August, quoting a Chinese health ministry official, that more than 65 percent of transplant donors are executed prisoners.

The Japan Society for Transplantation has banned transplantations using organs from those who have been executed at home and abroad.

Saku Machino, a member of the organization's ethics committee, expressed concern over the negative implications of Okumura's move.

"In terms of promoting Japanese transplant techniques abroad, it is an act that we should welcome. But at the same time, there remain concerns that it could become a catalyst for future transplantations considered ethically questionable," said Machino, a professor at Sophia University in Tokyo.

Okumura said he devised the technique a few years ago and agreed with the Chinese hospital to jointly conduct study work. He added he has explained his method to the hospital several times.

The Chinese side has failed in its tests on monkeys, according to Okumura. "But if their tests (on monkeys) become successful, they should be able to apply" the same method to human patients, he said.

He added, however, that he does not intend to cooperate in clinical testing because China has the problem of using organs from executed prisoners.

"In order for the hospital to use the antibody, they need my approval," he said.

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