

Parts is Parts

By Reg P. Wydeven
June 23, 2007

In the classic film, 'Star Trek II – The Wrath of Khan,' Admiral Kirk and his crew come across an old foe, Khan, portrayed by Ricardo Montalban. In the movie's climax, Mr. Spock sacrifices himself to save the crew of the U.S.S. Enterprise from Khan's last-ditch effort to destroy the ship. Prior to his death, Spock transplanted his Vulcan spirit, or "katra", into the mind of Dr. "Bones" McCoy.

In 'Star Trek III – The Search for Spock' Kirk and his crew steal the decommissioned Enterprise to retrieve Spock's body and bring it back to Vulcan. There, his katra was successfully re-transplanted from Bones back into his own body.

Without the transplant of his katra, Spock would have died, and all his logic along with him. Like Spock, over a million patients' lives in the U.S. each year are saved or greatly improved because of transplants.

Because the demand for organs and anatomical tissues is so high and the supply so low, harvesting and reselling body parts has become a rapidly growing, multibillion-dollar industry. Accordingly, the federal Food and Drug Administration recently stepped-up its efforts to inspect the companies that harvest tissues from cadavers, including bones, tendons, cartilage, heart valves and other non-organ parts.

The increased inspections come on the heels of several recent scandals in the industry, the biggest involving Biomedical Tissue Services of New Jersey. The head of the company and the former director of a New York funeral home will soon be tried on charges of stealing bodies and unlawfully harvesting their parts, including those of Alistair Cooke, the 90-year-old former host of PBS' "Masterpiece Theater." Seven funeral home directors have already pleaded guilty to similar charges.

Tens of thousands of body parts that were harvested by BTS have been recalled, however, about 10,000 patients have already received transplanted parts from the company. If these tissues are not properly screened and processed, recipients can contract serious infections, including HIV or hepatitis, or even die. These scandals have resulted in hundreds of lawsuits filed by infected recipients.

As a result of its inspections, the FDA is considering the following recommendations:

- The creation of a chain-of-custody system that ends with the recipient of the transplanted tissue. The current tracking system ends with the doctor or hospital that performs the transplant, making it difficult to warn patients who may have received improperly processed cadaver parts.
- Requiring companies that use tissue parts to audit their suppliers regularly.
- Hiring a microbiologist to address safety issues, such as sterilization or treatment procedures.

Industry experts hoped the FDA would use some of its muscle tissue to make more stringent rules, such as requiring licensing or background checks for operators of tissue banks, more and earlier inspections of tissues, and most importantly, limiting or banning retrieval of tissue from funeral homes because of increased chances of unsterile retrieval.

Because body parts are so valuable, hip-hop artist Rihanna recently insured her legs for \$1 million, a practice that goes back to the 1920s. Betty Grable coined the phrase "million dollar legs" by insuring hers for that amount, while Fred Astaire insured his for \$75,000 each.

Lloyd's of London, the most common insurer of body parts, does lots of homework before issuing such a policy. Because of his high-risk career, I'm sure Lloyd's would never issue a policy insuring Spock's ears.

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