

Film Review

Iranian Kidney Bargain Sale

Produced by: Hysteria Film AB

Director: Nima Sarvestani

Producer: Malla Grapengiesser

Running Time: 52 minutes

Reviewed by Jun Xu, BS

Iranian Kidney Bargain Sale, a documentary by director Nima Sarvestani, gives an intimate glimpse into the world of Iranian kidney transplantation from the perspective of donors and recipients. To date, Iran remains the only country in which human organs can be sold and bought as a market commodity, with the Iranian government serving in the role of the broker. India, which also had a tryst of commercial organ trade in the late 1980s, officially banned that practice in 1995; however, illegal trade in human organs still thrives in many regions of the country. In a frequently cited, controversial 2002 study, Goyal and colleagues¹ surveyed 305 individuals in Chennai, India, who sold their kidneys. The study revealed that most (96%) donors donated their kidneys because of external pressures to pay off financial obligations. Unfortunately, 33% of the donors experienced a contrary increase in debt burden, and 75% were still in debt 6 years after the operation. Further, 86% of those surveyed experienced a decline in health after nephrectomy.

Iran prides itself on its compensated and regulated living unrelated kidney donor transplantation program, which has been in existence for more than 3 decades and boasts an impressive record of more than 20 000 successful kidney transplants by 2006. The transplant waitlist was completely eliminated in Iran by 1999. These statistics are impressive in comparison with those of the United States, where the annual need for kidney transplants outnumber the actual operations performed by more than 60 000.

What is captivating about Sarvestani's work is that the film intertwines several donors' and recipients' lives to capture the human experience of organ trade in Iran. In doing so it shines an inquisitive beam to bring forth the human faces behind the state-sponsored organ procurement program.

The film opens with the scene of a busy kidney referral center in Tehran, one of more than 100 such centers in Iran. A young prospective donor inquires whether he can donate his kidney. Having obtained the donor's address, an agent from the referral center asks why the young man didn't go to the referral center in his own district. "They say it's better [pay] here," he responds. This short conversation frames Sarvestani's central thesis through the film: Iran's impressive statistic of no kidney waitlist comes at a costly moral toll—human exploitation.

In one of the main vignettes, Sohaila, a beautiful 27-year-old woman decides to sell her kidney to improve the lives of her sisters. To many Western viewers, her story will take on added poignancy because she is also a divorcee who had to take on additional debts to buy her freedom from her husband. At many points, the film exposes the devastating consequences of Iran's socioeconomic policies. For example, social inequalities between men and women lay bare in a dialogue between Sohaila and an agent from kidney referral agency. When it was revealed that she did not have a husband or father to give consent for the operation, the agent promptly referred Sohaila to the Institute of Judicial Medicine, to confirm that she was competent to make decisions that concerned her own body. In the end, Sohaila was finally allowed to donate her kidney to the 25-year-old Saied, a young man afflicted with a rare kidney disease. Saied's benefactor thanks Sohaila profusely, "you are doing something of great moral value." "It is not charitable," Sohaila replies, "I have 2 sisters, younger than Saied, and they count on me. The money from the operation will save 3 lives. Therefore I'd like to know exactly how much I'd get after the surgery."

To the viewers, the bargaining process between the film's sellers and buyers may prove to be especially stirring, even morally distressing. In watching Sohaila's exchanges with Saied's benefactor, one can't help but envision those material circumstances that may force each of us to bargain our own body parts to the highest bidder. It is not a comfortable feeling. As expected by the title, Iranian Kidney Bargain Sale depicts the Iranian kidney transplant program unkindly, and perhaps unjustly so. The number of successful kidney transplants performed to date in Iran is an extraordinary achievement, and, without a doubt, many donors are motivated by altruism. However, this documentary illustrates the ugly consequences that are fostered by a society that encourages regulated commercialism in organ trade. By its very nature, commercialism entails the selling of commodities to the highest bidder. When human organs are commodified, the costs are often paid at the expense of the donors' health, happiness, and, sometimes, lives. This film is a must-see for anyone who works in the field of transplantation, as well as patients considering participating in organ tourism.

Financial Disclosures

None reported.

Reference

1. Goyal M, Mehta RL, Schneiderman LJ, Sehgal AR. Economic and health consequences of selling a kidney in India. *JAMA*. 2002;288(13):1589-1593.