



The **DECLARATION** of **ISTANBUL**  
on **ORGAN TRAFFICKING** and **TRANSPLANT TOURISM**



1 June 2020

Dear Editor,

Medical and scientific journals have adopted standards to ensure that the articles they publish adhere to ethical as well as technical requirements and do not involve scientific misconduct, whether that involves falsification, fabrication, and plagiarism or violations of the rights and welfare of patients and other persons. To implement the latter goal, some journals explicitly require that authors affirm their adherence to, for example, the Declaration of Helsinki on research with human beings, created by the World Medical Association in 1964 and since updated nine times,<sup>1</sup> and the Declaration of Istanbul on organ trafficking and transplant tourism, created by The Transplantation Society and the International Society of Nephrology in 2008 and updated in 2018.<sup>2</sup>

In response to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, biomedical researchers and physicians around the world have undertaken an extraordinary range of experiments and studies to understand this novel virus at the molecular, clinical, and population levels. The pressing need for such knowledge cannot be doubted, but that does not justify departing from scientific and ethical standards. Indeed, in a review of Ebola research conducted during the 2014-15 outbreak in Africa, the U.S. National Academy of Medicine concluded that “despite [the] sense of urgency, research during an epidemic is still subject to the same core scientific and ethical requirements that govern all research on human subjects.”<sup>3</sup> Editors of leading biomedical journals, such as yourself, have recognized that they must use their power to publish, or not to publish, as a means of conveying to researchers the need always to adhere to these “core scientific and ethical requirements.”

On behalf of the Council of the Declaration of Istanbul Custodian Group (DICG), we wish to remind you of the risk—at a time when journals are under pressure to move as rapidly as possible to disseminate possibly useful findings regarding COVID-19—that the usual safeguards of quality and ethics may be ignored. Our particular concern is that articles involving organ transplantation (such as reports on special problems of, or treatment protocols for, transplant patients with COVID-19, or studies of how organ donation can be safely carried out under pandemic conditions) may be submitted from centers where organ trafficking or other unethical practices are known to have occurred. Even in normal time, some journals have inadvertently published papers which arose from transplant research that failed to meet core ethical requirements for living and deceased organ donation (such as, consent and lack of coercion).

We hope that your journal will reject any paper about transplantation if the origin of the grafts is not clearly documented and shown to be ethical. As the responsible officials of one prominent journal recently declared (in an editorial explaining their retraction of seven published articles whose failure to follow ethical standards had not been identified at the time of publication), at a minimum, “all authors in all countries [must] consider the origin of the transplanted organs described in their article” and must attest “that the necessary ethical boundaries and approvals for research are in place and transparent.”<sup>4</sup>

We trust that biomedical investigators and editors share the conclusion that although global crises “present major logistical and practical challenges, the moral mission of research remains the same.”<sup>5</sup> We would be interested in learning how, during this period of urgent publications on COVID-19, your journal ensures that reviewers and editorial board members are suitably attentive to research ethics, especially in the context of organ transplantation.



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Respectfully yours,

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on behalf of the Council of the Declaration of Istanbul Custodian Group.

**References:**

1. <https://www.wma.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/DoH-Oct2008.pdf>.
2. <https://www.declarationofistanbul.org/>.
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5. London AJ, Kimmelman J. Against pandemic research exceptionalism. *Science* 2020 Apr 23; 368 (6490):476-477.