



Division over honour for Chinese transplant doctor

7.30 By Adam Harvey

Updated Tue 30 Apr 2013, 10:09am AEST

A coalition of academics, doctors and lawyers is pushing for the Australian-trained man behind China's controversial organ transplant program to be stripped of honorary professorships bestowed by the University of Sydney.

China's transplant program has sparked protests around the world because many of the kidneys, lungs and livers used to save patients' lives come from executed prisoners.

For years recipients from all over the world have bought organs from Chinese authorities, with at least 90 per cent of those organs coming from prisoners.

University of Sydney professor of medicine Maria Fiatarone Singh says Chinese officials perfected the use of execution by lethal injection as a way to preserve organs of the prisoners.

"The person is anaesthetised, they don't die straight away, [that] gives the surgeons time to take out as many organs as they would like to, and then the lethal injection finalised," she said.

"Very different to killing someone as quickly and humanely as possible. It's done in such a way that actually allows this very, very unsavoury mix of execution and medical care and treatment to be done by the same team of doctors.

"It's horrific really."

China says the prisoners decide to donate their organs, but the practice is condemned by the United Nations, the World Health Organisation and other international medical bodies.

Professor Fiatarone Singh says given they are incarcerated, prisoners "don't have the freedom to make that decision".

One of the key figures behind the program was University of Sydney-trained doctor Huang Jiefu, who served as China's vice minister of health for 12 years until earlier this year.

"He himself is a liver transplant surgeon," Professor Fiatarone Singh said.

"He himself has stated, as recently as 2012, that he continues to perform two liver transplants per week, so that would be 100 organs per year, and using his own figures 90 to 95 per cent come from executed prisoners."

A prisoner's body can be worth as much as \$500,000, when it is broken down into parts like the liver, kidneys and eyes.

China leads the world in executions with as many as 4,000 a year, according to human rights groups.

'Unethical system'

Dr Huang has been lauded by the university with an honorary professorship, and that title was recently extended for another three years.

Professor Fiatarone Singh has joined a chorus of opponents of the Chinese organ transplant program who have petitioned vice chancellor Michael Spence to take back Dr Huang's honours.

"We shouldn't be giving him any kind of publicity or honour for the things he's done," she said.

"Speaking about him as a fellow physician, he can't possibly be adhering to the dictum that we all take - 'first do no harm' - because there's no way that you could consider using people in the way that he has, as transplant donors, as being concordant with that philosophy.

"On a very human level its hard to understand how someone could call himself a doctor and yet carry out these practices."

Co-signatories of the petition include surgeons and medical professors from the United States, Germany and Israel and New South Wales Greens MP David Shoebridge.

"One of our most prestigious institutions, the University of Sydney, is meant to be standing up for the best ideal of society, democracy, academic freedom," Mr Shoebridge said.

"For it to be awarding some of its highest honours to a medical practitioner who benefited, year after year, from transplanting the organs of executed prisoners, is a betrayal of those key ideals."

Human rights lawyer David Matas backed calls for the university to strip Dr Huang of his honours.

"It's my position that Huang Jiefu, being responsible for an unethical system, and himself participating in transplants, has engaged in unethical behaviour and his professorship should be revoked for that reason," he said.

Support

However, Dr Huang has his defenders, who say he has worked to end China's reliance on prisoners.

University of Sydney professor of transplant surgery Richard Allen says in the transplant community around the world he is seen as "an absolute champion and a hero".

"I've known Huang since 1987," Professor Allen said.

"He knew that the use of organs from executed prisoners were wrong [but at the] time was a junior surgeon, and he was part of the system and did what his seniors did."

Professor Bruce Robinson, dean of the university's medical school, authorised Dr Huang's appointment to honorary professor.

"The university has to stand for things, and we believe this is a very, very important set of principles that Jiefu pursuing in China, and that is reform of use of transplanted organs," he said.

"And we ought to support him... and therefore we're going to stand with him."

Despite Dr Huang's efforts, China's transplant program remains heavily reliant on the organs of executed prisoners.

Topics: medical-ethics, doctors-and-medical-professionals, health, university-and-further-education, china, the-university-of-sydney-2006

First posted Mon 29 Apr 2013, 7:32pm AEST
