With age comes...a missed opportunity?

Jacob A. Klapper, MD

From the Division of Cardiothoracic Surgery, Duke University Medical Center, Durham, NC.

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Address for reprints: Jacob A. Klapper, MD, Division of Cardiothoracic Surgery, DUMC 3954, Durham, NC 27710 (E-mail: Jacob.klapper@duke.edu).

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There is a famous saying, attributed to any number of notable individuals, that says, “Age is an issue of mind over matter. If you don’t mind, it doesn’t matter.” Unfortunately, to most of us age does matter, because we have become conditioned to associate youth with unfettered productivity, creativity, and, in certain instances, the generation of astounding works of genius. In a *New Yorker* article on this very subject, Malcolm Gladwell¹ catalogues how, although Mozart wrote Piano Concerto No. 9 at 21, Orson Welles made *Citizen Kane* at 25, and Picasso produced masterpieces at 20, greatness is not the private domain of the young. Similarly, Holley and colleagues² demonstrate in their article in this issue of the *Journal* that this preoccupation with youth remains pervasive even in the field of lung transplantation.

As Holley and colleagues² note, there has traditionally been a bias against older donors, as evidenced by the paltry percentage of lung transplants that have come from donors older than 55 years. The current study nicely evaluates this center’s outcomes, in the lung allocation score era, with donors across a range of ages. When bronchiolitis obliterans syndrome-free and rejection-free survivals were evaluated at the 1- and 5-year marks, age of the donor was not a factor. Another interesting finding was that the outcome similarities persisted even when the older donor had a smoking history. As an interesting aside, Holley and colleagues² did note that the recipients of lungs from donors older than 60 years had a tendency toward a more complicated postoperative course, as evidenced by higher odds of prolonged ventilation, intensive care unit stay, and overall hospital stay.

The predominant strength of the article of Holley and colleagues² is that it gives further credence to the concept that older donor age should not discourage organ utilization. Other groups have demonstrated many of these same results in previous publications; clearly this preoccupation with age persists, however, with only 14% of donors older than 55 years even in the current study. How to explain this persistent bias? One plausible explanation is that the initial struggle

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Central Message

Despite a growing body of evidence to the contrary, older donors continue to be underutilized because of the perception that their recipients do worse long term. This mind-set should be discouraged.

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of recipients of lungs from older donors (as already noted for donors older than 60 years) may color our perceptions of how those patients do long term. Certainly, as surgeons we have a tendency to become preoccupied with those patients who have prolonged postoperative courses. As a result, we search for plausible explanations, examining donor characteristics and perhaps attributing too much of what we see to donor age—forgetting that many different forces are at work in determining how patients do after such a complex procedure.

In sum, the article of Holley and colleagues² provides yet additional evidence that the bias against older donors is unfounded and that we are underutilizing a large number of organs. As Gladwell¹ reminds us, not all greatness resides with youth, as evidenced by the fact that Mark Twain published *Huckleberry Finn* at 49 years, and Alfred Hitchcock directed a number of classic movies in his late 50s. Age, it would seem, is just a number.

References

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