

## PHILOSOPHY NOW

### Merit or Equality: Who Gets to Live?

Organ transplant operations are incredibly expensive, organs are in very short supply, and transplants are desperately needed by far more people than can be accommodated. The waiting list for transplants is long, and thousands die every year for their lack. Screening committees at transplant centers decide whether someone should be placed on the waiting list and what ranking he or she should receive. They use various criteria to make these decisions, some explicit, some informal or unspoken, some plausible (such as the patient's need and likelihood of benefit), and some controversial (such as ability to pay, social worthiness, and health habits).

Among these, social or moral worthiness—merit—is probably the most contentious. Here the questions are: Which potential recipients—if given the chance to live—are expected to contribute most to the good of society? Or which possible recipients do not deserve transplants, because they have indulged in habits (like excessive alcohol use or dangerous activities) that contributed to their impending organ failure? To state the issue concretely: All things being equal, should the medical student or priest get the transplant instead of the prostitute or alcoholic?

Many reject such appeals to merit and insist that the proper criteria are egalitarian—a matter of justice and the moral equality of persons. They argue that all persons have equal worth. Morally, the medical student is not worth more than the prostitute or alcoholic, and vice versa. Education, achievement, occupation, and the like are not morally relevant.

Nevertheless, while generally taking the egalitarian approach, some philosophers maintain that in very rare cases, social worth can outweigh egalitarian concerns. It seems reasonable that in a natural disaster involving mass casualties, injured physicians or nurses should be treated first if they can aid the other survivors.



**Figure 8.5** Who should get the only available liver or heart—the person chosen by lottery, the upright citizen, the man who donates thousands of dollars to the hospital, the priest, or the homeless child?

**Should social or moral worth ever be taken into account in deciding who should get a transplant? Suppose the question is whether to give a transplant to a Nobel laureate or to a hard-working, honest truck driver. Assuming that all other factors are equal, which one should get the transplant? Why?**