

Addressing Head Transplantation and Its Legal, Social and Neuroethical Implications

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Abstract : This paper examines the legal and medical ethics concerns, which proponents of human head transplantation continue to defy since the procedure was first attempted on dogs in 1908. Despite recent bioethical objections, proponents have proceeded with radical experimentation, claiming transplantation would treat incurable diseases and improve patients' quality of life. In 2018, Italian neurosurgeon, Sergio Canavero, and Dr. Xiaoping Ren claimed to have performed a head transplant on a corpse in China. Content analysis of literature shows that the procedure failed to satisfy scientific, legal, and bioethical elements because, unlike humans, corpses cannot coordinate function. Putting a severed head onto a body that has been dead for several days is not equivalent to a transplant which would require successfully reconnecting and restoring function to a spinal cord. While reconnection without restoration of bodily function is not transplantation, the publicized procedure on animals and corpses could leapfrog to humans, sparking excitement in society likely to affect organ donors and recipients from territorial jurisdictions with varying legal and ethical regimes. As neurodiscoveries generate further excitement, the need to preemptively address the legal and medical ethics impact of head transplantation in our society cannot be overstated. A preemptive development of methods to address the impact of head transplantation will help harmonizing national and international laws on organ donations, advance directives, and laws affecting end of life.

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