

Bill would allow organ harvesting from children with parental OK

By ALEX MARTIN

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As pressure mounts to revise the controversial organ transplant law, lawmakers across party lines submitted a fresh bill Friday to the Diet on top of the three bills that are already being deliberated.

The latest bill would basically prohibit those under 15 from agreeing to be an organ donor, but allow harvesting if the parents and a third party panel acknowledges brain death and agrees to the donation. The third-party panel's nod would also be required.

"It will be up to the parents to decide whether to donate their children's organs," Takumi Nemoto of the Liberal Democratic Party, the chief proponent of the new amendment, told reporters Friday.

"Japanese cannot easily accept brain death as 'death' . . . but I believe this plan would leave that opinion up to individuals, while opening the door for child organ donations," Nemoto said.

The 12-year-old law currently prohibits those under 15 from being organ donors, forcing many children to seek transplants overseas.

The restriction has been criticized for promoting "organ transplant tourism," as well as undermining Japan's self-sufficiency in providing organs and leaving many patients in need of them waiting in limbo.

So far, three other amendments have been submitted

to the Diet — Plan A would toss out the donor age limit altogether, Plan B is similar to the current law but would lower the age limit to 12 and Plan C stipulates maintaining the current age limit but would further tighten the terms and conditions for brain death. The fresh bill submitted Friday would be Plan D.

Michikata Okubo, director of the nonprofit Japan Transplant Recipient Organization, argued the fourth bill would force a difficult decision on parents.

"The newly submitted Plan D asks the parents to decide whether their child is brain-dead or not," Okubo said.

"And parents usually face extreme difficulty making that decision."

Brain death is a sensitive issue, as many family members refuse to accept this if their loved ones' hearts are still beating.

Plan A recognizes brain death as actual death, while the current law and Plan B recognize brain death as death only in terms of organ transplants. Plan C would make the definition of brain death stricter than under the current law.

With the World Health Organization set to ask member nations later this month to discourage people from traveling overseas for transplants, lawmakers are scrambling to revise the law during the current Diet session.

There have only been 81 cases of organ transplants from brain-dead patients in the past 12 years in Japan.

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