Reviewer's report

Title: A critique on the Policy Statement of the American Academy of Pediatrics - Children as Hematopoietic Stem Cell Donors - conditions too easy to fulfill

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Reviewer: Heidi Mertes

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A critique on the Policy Statement of the American Academy of Pediatrics – Children as Hematopoietic Stem Cell Donors – conditions too easy to fulfill

This manuscript comments on the Policy statement of the American Academy of Pediatrics and comes to the conclusion that the criteria that are currently in the statement are too easily fulfilled. The authors suggest to add 2 additional criteria: (1) it must be impossible to preserve the life of the sick sibling without harvesting tissues from a ‘saviour’ sibling and (2) without the transplantation, the sick sibling will inevitably die within a short period of time. They argue, for example, that parents are only morally permitted to consent to harvest of tissues from a saviour child after a search is undertaken of adult family members and of the international bone marrow donor registry.

The ethical argumentation is concise and rather basic. I am not convinced that the authors thought through the implications of their own standpoints and their interpretation of the Policy Statement appears rather selective (see specific comments below).

Major compulsory revisions:

1. Whereas the Policy Statement deals with children as HSC donors in general, this manuscript only considers so-called saviour siblings. This would make sense if the authors would have a problem with the donation of umbilical cord blood (which sets saviour siblings apart from other pediatric donors), but in fact they explicitly exclude umbilical cord blood donation from their analysis. Either the authors should indicate that their recommendations are valid for all pediatric donors (and replace the term ‘saviour siblings’ throughout the manuscript), or they should indicate why they apply to saviour siblings but not to other donors.

2. The authors should elaborate on their own two additional criteria. They are just stated in one sentence before the conclusion, but not explained. I have several issues with these criteria. First, I do not really see a fundamental difference between the first and the second (except that the second specifies that the sick sibling should die fast). Second, the authors should specify what they mean by ‘impossible’ and ‘inevitably’. These transplants are always a matter of weighing probabilities, so for example, if an adult donor is available that gives the child a 20% chance of survival, versus a pediatric donor that gives a 90% chance of survival, the authors’ criteria would require us to use the adult donor (as there is a possibility that the child will be saved without a transplant from the pediatric
donor (1) / the sick sibling will not ‘inevitably’ die without the pediatric transplant (2). Also, the authors argue that checking the international donor registry should be compulsory before considering a pediatric donor, but what if the time that is required to search that database (or to gather the money to be able to pay the cost) has a detrimental impact on the patient’s chances of survival? These are just two instances in which the authors come to a different conclusion than the policy statement but due to an absence of elaboration on the additional criteria, I am not sure if the authors accept these implications of their own criteria or not.

Minor essential revisions

1. Please quote the Academy’s statement correctly: not ‘some’ likelihood that the recipient will benefit, but ‘a reasonable’ likelihood.

2. “Although the parents’ wishes should command very great respect, the court (in our case, the parents) is to exercise an independent and objective judgment.”

3. Under ‘The least detrimental approach’ the authors only discuss one of three reasons given by the Academy why the search for an adult donor need not include searching the international donor database, namely that authorization of stem cell donation by the parents falls within the realm of parental decision making. I agree that this is not a strong argument. However, the Academy also mentions that a sibling gives better chances of survival and that searching the registry implies losing valuable time and is sometimes not affordable by the parents. These additional arguments should at least be mentioned.

Discretionary revisions

4. “The issue at hand is to draw a line between our moral duty to protect the ‘saviour’ and to respect the right of the parents to make their autonomous choices”. Is the issue not rather to which extent a minor’s bodily integrity can be harmed to save a life? (so non-maleficence versus beneficence instead of non-maleficence versus autonomy) Otherwise we should not even be considering the benefit for the recipient, only the parents’ will, which would be quite immoral.

5. The “recent useful court case” of separating two conjoined twins is not very persuasive. Of course, this is a situation in which the sibling on the receiving end will die without an intervention and in which no one other than one specific sibling is able to make the sacrifice to save him/her (which are the conditions that the authors wish to use for pediatric bone marrow donors). This analogy is used to show that under these circumstances a significant sacrifice is warranted, which appears convincing at first sight. However, I hope that the authors are aware that this conclusion does not logically follow. First of all, even if the analogy would be solid, then it would only show that under these circumstances the sacrifice is warranted, but not that it would not be warranted under less stringent conditions, so although it would mean that a transplant is certainly morally permitted under the conditions specified by the authors, it does not show that it would not be morally permitted under the conditions as specified by the Academy. Second, the analogy in itself is problematic as the sacrifice is fundamentally different: in one
case the ‘giving’ sibling dies prematurely due to him/her helping a sibling, in the other case he/she bears minimal to moderate risks.

**Level of interest:** An article of limited interest

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.