Taiwan Prosecutors Probe HIV Organ Transplants

(AP) — Physicians at a hospital in Taiwan that mistakenly transplanted four patients with HIV-infected organs may face criminal prosecution, an official said Friday. The doctors involved may face up to 10 years in prison if found to have caused patients to contract the HIV virus by negligence, Taipei Prosecutors' Office spokesman Lin Wen-teh said.
Last week, Taipei's National Taiwan University Hospital performed the transplants of the liver, lungs and two kidneys from a donor it mistakenly believed was HIV negative. Another facility, National Chengkung University Hospital, transplanted the heart into a patient there based on NTUH's information. NTUH, one of Taiwan's best medical institutions, said a staffer misheard the donor's test results as "non-reactive" when the English word "reactive" was actually given, meaning the donor had HIV. The information was given by telephone, and the hospital admitted the donor's HIV status was not double-checked as standard procedure required.
The head of the university hospital's transplant department, Ke Wen-che, resigned Thursday to take responsibility for the blunder. He said he was responsible for the transplant program in its entirety, and declined to blame either the staffer who mishandled the HIV information, or other physicians directly involved in the transplant procedures. Meanwhile, the Health Department is also looking into the mistake.

But department official Shih Chung-liang says it would be improper to put all the blame on the staffer who mishandled the HIV test results. Still, he said, if negligence is found to have caused the blunder, NTUH may have to suspend its transplant programs for up to a year in addition to paying unspecified fines. NTUH has not disclosed if the organ recipients have tested positive for HIV, but health experts say it's likely they will be infected and it will complicate their treatment.

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