LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Regulatory updates are needed to prevent the commercialization of islet transplantation in the United States

To the Editor:

We are writing with great concern about the consequences of applying drug-related regulations to human allogeneic islets (allo-islets). Currently, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is reviewing a Biologics License Application (BLA) for the isolation of allogeneic islets which, if approved, will effectively confer marketing rights to a private, for-profit company.1 We believe this will lead to the commercialization of human pancreatic islets and limit access to islet transplantation for Americans with diabetes (Figure 1A). This scenario directly conflicts with the intent of the 1984 National Organ Transplantation Act (NOTA), under which human organs (e.g., pancreas) and their subparts (e.g., islets) are protected from commercialization.2 3 Furthermore, this approach jeopardizes the public role of academic transplant programs, which as stewards of donated public good (i.e., human organs), are entrusted with their safe, transparent, and just allocation. Lastly, regulating islets as biological drugs also removes them from the safeguards which help keep transplantation of all other organs safe, ethical, and fair.3

Human islets, just like the pancreas, are de facto treated as organs already, since both require the same procurement, allocation, and distribution framework in the United States. Given the organ-like structural and functional anatomy (including an internal vasculature), which remains preserved during the entirety of the transplantation process, islets should properly be classified and regulated as other vascularized organs for transplantation. Human organs, other than islets, are regulated by UNOS/OPTN in the United States. This list already includes vascularized composite tissue allografts which were added by the Secretary of the Department of Human Health Services (HHS) to the list of transplantable organs in 2013.4 As we recently reported in detail, we are not proposing the deregulation of islet transplantation; rather, a scientifically justified update based on the current state-of-the-art in clinical practice.3 We made three main recommendations: (1) allo-islets should be exempt from drug regulations, just as autologous islets already are, since both types of islets are processed exactly the same; (2) the current regulatory system for allo-islet transplantation is very effective and functions without BLA requirements and additional FDA drug manufacturing standards; and (3) islets are already regulated as organs for transplantation and are safely and effectively offered as a standard-of-care treatment option in developed nations with the notable exception of the United States.1

For optimal regulatory oversight and in order to foster clinical islet transplantation in the United States, we strongly recommend that the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services with his/her legal authority urgently designate islets as human organs. This action will enable proper islet regulation under the robust OPTN/UNOS framework developed for organ transplantation and will prevent islet commercialization (Figure 1B). This regulatory action will help preserve human islets as a public resource and help make islet transplantation a safe, effective, accessible, and affordable standard-of-care procedure for diabetic care in the United States.

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**Figure 1** (A) Current regulatory structure of organ versus islet transplantation (B) Proposed regulatory structure for islet transplantation

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