

Susan Lederer, *Flesh and Blood: Organ Transplantation and Blood Transfusion in Twentieth-Century America*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2008.

ISBN: 978-0-19-516150-2

**Reviewed by Marianna Stylianou
(Monash University)**

Susan Lederer's recent contribution to the history of blood transfusion and organ transplantation provides some brilliant anecdotes that illustrate twentieth-century America's uniqueness in this area of medical practice. In particular they highlight the relative ease that organs and blood were commodified by Americans and how race relations had a marked effect on how organ and blood transfer were understood and negotiated. For example, Lederer narrates the account of a millionaire who placed an advertisement in the *New York Times* offering \$5,000 for a right ear to replace the one he had lost in an accident. The advertisement, which appeared in November 1903 prior to the millionaire's imminent marriage, stated that he would accept a donation from a woman because, as his surgeon explained, she would be better able to cover the missing ear by adjusting her hairstyle (pp.72-3). Lederer later presents the case of a senile, 72-year-old, white prisoner who showed remarkable mental and physical improvements following the grafting of an executed African American prisoner's testes onto him, giving him more 'jazz and pep' than was usually found in a much younger man (p.169). She also mentions that during the 1960s prisons in Massachusetts, South Carolina, Mississippi and Virginia offered inmates a reduction of five days from their sentence for each pint of blood they donated (p.93). These anecdotes, which highlight the currency of body parts and fluids in this period in America, and the racial undertones present in their transfer, demonstrate this topic's distinctiveness and appeal. But while the potential of these historical accounts to provide a much deeper insight into the American psyche is great, it remains largely underutilised by the author.

In *Flesh and Blood* Lederer aims to show how popular ideas and understandings of blood transfusion and organ transplantation in twentieth-century America were not static but contingent on contemporary cultural and social values relating to the body. While this is not a novel concept for historians, general readers and health professionals may find this reading enlightening. Indeed the strength of the book lies in its numerous anecdotes describing instances of grafting, transfusions and transplants throughout the period. These entertaining accounts greatly enhance the book's readability and engagement with the audience; however some historians may find that the book relies too heavily on them and lacks the expected depth of analysis. At times the book seems to be overwhelmed by the many anecdotes provided. Lederer does not explicitly outline her arguments in relation to the evidence she amasses, nor does she develop many solid conclusions leaving the reader with unanswered questions and a feeling that more could have been done with the material presented, which is impressive not only for its volume but also its historical significance.

In this study, Lederer uses evidence collected from newspapers, medical journals, films and novels. She explores the surgical developments of the early twentieth century that influenced the grafting of body parts and blood transfusion in Chapters One and Two respectively. Her account is not limited to human-to-human transfer but also covers the grafting and transplantation of animal body parts in humans. The third chapter focuses on the commodification of human blood and organs, the extent of which is uniquely American. A comparison with the experiences of similarly developed nations where such a market barely, if ever, existed would have sharpened the contrast and allowed for further exploration as to why this market developed so strongly in America. Chapter Four explores the transfusion of blood between different races, and the scientific investigation of this is further investigated in the subsequent chapter which examines the development of immunological typing of blood and tissues. The way notions of race affected organ transplantation is highlighted in the sixth chapter, and is best demonstrated by the account of African American Bruce Tucker who was declared one of the 'unclaimed dead' and his heart transplanted into a white

executive without a prior attempt to contact or gain consent from his family. Lederer explores the anxieties relating to religious understandings of the transfer of blood and organs in the penultimate chapter, focusing in particular on the refusal of Jehovah's Witnesses to receive blood transfusions.

Although the book aims to cover developments throughout the 1900s, most of it is concerned with the early to mid-twentieth century. There were many developments in the last two decades of the century that influenced the field, not only technological advances but also the emergence of HIV/AIDS and the mapping of the human genome. Yet these aspects are only briefly considered, often in the last few paragraphs of a chapter, when their implications could have been further teased out to provide a more satisfactory account of developments during the period and how notions of the transfer of body parts and fluids were influenced in response. Despite the later chapters showing more promise of an in-depth analysis of racial and religious values in terms of the medicalisation and commodification of the body, certain areas are glossed over and underdeveloped. How scientific discoveries were translated into popular beliefs and how ideas about race, blood and tissue types were, and continue to be, socially and scientifically constructed are questions that could have been further investigated. *Flesh and Blood* has obviously been thoroughly researched, but unfortunately the text is inundated with anecdotes that do not allow for the author's voice to be heard.