

'Kidney cult' enticed son, couple says

22-year-old Australian came to Canada to donate to a Toronto woman he met online, according to parents

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An Australian couple say they contacted the Ontario Ministry of Health and several hospitals to prevent their son from donating a kidney to a Toronto-area woman, insisting he had been coerced into donating the kidney by a group the Australian media have dubbed a religious cult.

According to his parents, Nick and Kate Croft, Ashwyn Falkingham, 22, came to Canada in March to donate a kidney to a woman he met through a website - Living Donors Online.

Mr. Croft said his son belongs to a group called the Jesus Christians, which believes that donating a kidney will bring them closer to God. He called the group a religious cult.

Referring to his mother's decision to intervene, Mr. Falkingham told the Globe and Mail yesterday that it was "a bit insulting."

"What she wrote was hurtful, and full of inaccuracies," he said.

The Crofts allege the group's leader, David McKay, persuades his followers to donate their kidneys, possibly in an effort to maintain his hold over them.

Mr. Croft said his son intended to donate the kidney to an Australian woman about 18 months ago, but she died before the transplant could take place.

In an interview with the Globe, Mr. Croft said he sent an e-mail to the Ontario Ministry of Health a few weeks ago warning them about his son's case. He said he received an e-mail back from the ministry offering a list of hospitals where the transplant could take place.

He sent the same message to the hospitals on the list.

"I gave them some links, and also sent them a DVD showing other kidney operations that [Mr. McKay] has engineered, or has caused to happen. He always tries to get some media coverage from these events," Mr. Croft said.

Mr. Falkingham said he arrived in Canada on March 19, and had his first tests at Toronto General Hospital the following day. He said the intended recipient's insurance company paid for his flight and hotel stay while in Canada. According to Mr. Falkingham, he underwent phone interviews with several members of the hospital staff, including a psychologist and a bio-ethicist, before making the trip to Canada, none of whom raised any concerns about his decision to donate his kidney.

Robert Bell, CEO of the University Health Network, which governs Toronto General Hospital, declined to comment, stating that it is against hospital policy to discuss particular patient cases.

Mr. Falkingham said the recipient's name was Sandi Sabloff.

Reached at her North York home last night, Ms. Sabloff said only that she knew Mr. Falkingham, but declined to comment further, citing her lawyer's advice.

In a web post on Living Donors Online, someone called "Sandi" wrote: "I am truly devastated and heartbroken that Toronto General has banned this altruistic donation, particularly since the hospital had approved the operation and sent me a letter confirming the operation date."

Mr. Croft e-mailed Toronto General Hospital stating his son had been brainwashed and was incapable of making decisions for himself.

Mr. Falkingham's mother, Kate Croft, said the kidney donations are a publicity stunt designed to garner attention for the group, which has been dubbed the "kidney cult" in Australian media because so many of its members have donated kidneys. According to published reports, Mr. McKay donated a kidney at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., in January of 2003.

Mr. Falkingham said that members of the group are not coerced into donating their kidneys and that they hope to raise awareness for live kidney donations through their actions.

Communications between Mr. Falkingham and his parents have been infrequent, and often mediated through other members of the group, Mr. Croft said. A few months ago, Mr. Croft let his son and the group use his studio, a small house in the mountains on the outskirts of Sydney, as a meeting place. When Mr. Croft arrived a few days later, he had a chance to observe the group dynamic.

"I was there for about an hour," he said. "And [Mr. McKay] was in control of every little bit of conversation. He was just there, controlling everything."

Mrs. Croft said she hasn't spoken to her son without the interference of Mr. McKay for the past three years.

Mr. Falkingham returned to Sydney this morning and said he still hopes that he can donate his kidney to Ms. Sabloff.

"In the end, if it's impossible for me to donate, that's sad, because that's something positive I could have done," he said.

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