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Organ Donation and Religious Beliefs



A guide to organ and tissue
donation and Hindu beliefs

Hindu Faith and organ donation

Introduction to organ and tissue donation

Organ and tissue donation is the gift of an organ and/or tissue to help someone who needs a transplant. Hundreds of people's lives across Scotland are saved or improved each year by organ and tissue transplants. But, on average, every day someone in the UK dies while waiting for an organ transplant.

Organs that can be donated by people after death include the heart, lungs, kidneys, liver, pancreas and small bowel. Tissue, such as heart valves, tendons, corneas and skin can also be donated to help others. Living donation of a kidney, bone or occasionally part of a liver is also possible.

When can organ and tissue donation after death take place?

Doctors and other healthcare staff are committed to doing everything possible to save a patient's life. Organ or tissue donation is only considered once all attempts to save their life have failed.

The majority of deceased donor organs are donated after a person's death has been confirmed using neurological criteria, also known as 'brainstem death'. This is where a person with a severe brain injury is on a ventilator in an intensive care unit. Their brain injury will have damaged the vital centres in the brain stem, which are essential for life. This is not the same as being in a coma or a vegetative state. Tests are carried out by two senior doctors, who are independent of the transplant team, on two different occasions and following strict criteria.

When brainstem death is confirmed, the patient will still be on a ventilator (a machine that pushes air into the lungs and supports the circulation of blood around the body). The ventilator artificially maintains the oxygen supply to the organs.

Alternatively, there are also cases where clinicians have agreed with the patient's family that there is no realistic prospect of the patient surviving and a decision has been made to withdraw the patient's life-sustaining treatment. In such cases, organs can be donated after 'circulatory death', which is after a person's heart stops beating and they stop breathing.

Hindu Faith and organ donation

There are many references that support the concept of organ donation in Hindu scriptures. "Daan" and "Seva" are two of the cardinal principles of the Hindu faith. "Daan" is the original word in Sanskrit for donation, meaning selfless giving. In the list of the ten Niyamas (virtuous acts) "Daan" comes third. "Seva" refers to service and, by donating, one serves selflessly.

"Giving Daan is an integral part of SANATANA DHARMA, more popularly known as HINDUISM. Organ and tissue daan carries unique significance in Sanatana Dharma, but the decision has to be taken by the individual during their lifetime."

Acharya Ji, Head Priest of the Hindu Temple, Glasgow

“Of all the things that it is possible to donate, to donate your own body is infinitely more worthwhile.” The Manusmriti

“In the joy of others lies our own.”

***His Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj,
BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha***

Life after death is a strong belief of Hindus. The law of Karma (your action influences your future) decides your soul's destiny following reincarnation. The soul either achieves permanent liberation from the cycle of rebirth (moksha) or is reborn in a different body. The Bhagavad Gita describes the mortal body and the immortal soul in a simple way like the relationship of clothes to a body:

“As a person puts on new garments giving up the old ones, the soul similarly accepts new material bodies giving up the old and useless ones.”

Bhagavad Gita, chapter 2:22

“Organ Daan has more significance than all material daans.

I believe there is need to raise awareness of organ donation amongst the Hindu community. The religious text on Dadeechi Muni tells us about donating his bones to save human life, saving other people's lives is the best service to God. In the Holy Ramayana there is mention of the mighty king Ravana offering his organs to the Lord Shiva.”

Mr Amrit Paul Kaushal (BA MSc. Dip Ed MBE), Former General Secretary of the Hindu Temple

Family involvement

Families play a key role in organ and tissue donation. If you die in circumstances where you could be an organ donor, a specialist nurse would check the NHS Organ Donor Register to see if you had registered a decision (either to donate or to opt out of donation). They would also speak to your family to ask them about whether you had ever expressed any views for or against being a donor and whether your faith would place any restrictions on donation.

So, whatever your decision, it's important your family know what you want. This will make it easier for them to help make sure that your donation decision is honoured. It will also ensure that, for example, NHS staff can ensure any particular conditions you wish to attach to your donation are taken on board.

Care and respect

The removal of organs and tissues is carried out with utmost care and respect. The family can see the body afterwards and staff can contact a chaplain or local religious leader if the family would like this. The organ donation operation is normally complete within a few hours and so the body can be returned to the family for cremation straight after that.

Making your choice

You can find out more about organ and tissue donation and register your decision, whatever it is, online at organdonationscotland.org or by calling **0300 123 23 23**.

How do I become a donor?

If you want to donate some or all of your organs and/or tissue after your death, the best way to ensure your family know what you want and honour your decision is to register as a donor on the NHS Organ Donor Register and to tell your family what you have decided. You can also record on the register whether your faith/belief is important and should be considered as part of the donation discussion.

What if I don't want to donate?

If you don't want to donate, it is important to register this decision on the NHS Organ Donor Register and to tell your family. Don't 'opt out' of donation though if you are happy to donate some organs or tissue, but not others. Instead, register as a donor and select only the organs or tissue you are willing to donate.

To find out more about organ and tissue donation, your choices and how to register your donation decision visit:

organdonationscotland.org

Or call **0300 123 23 23**

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