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Organ Donation and Religious Beliefs



A guide to organ and tissue
donation and Sikh beliefs

Sikh religion 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.

Organ donation is an individual person's choice. However some may think of donating organs as Nishkam Seva.

“As Sikhs, donating our organs is the final service in our earthly life to carry out Nishkam Seva, so embrace this opportunity with compassion and love.”

*Ravinder Kaur Nijjar
Sikh Representative, Scottish Religious Leaders Forum, Advisor, Sikhs in Scotland*

When organ and tissue donation can take place after death

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 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.

"Sikhs have achieved many accolades for their commitment to the selfless service of society.

What could be a greater service to society?

What could be a greater service to humanity, which we see as the embodiment of God, than donating one's organs once we pass through this mortal life."

*Surjit Singh Chowdhary, President,
Central Gurdwara, Singh Sabha*

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). This prevents the organs from losing the oxygen-rich blood supply, which helps keep the organs functioning.

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

Family involvement

Families play a key role in organ and tissue donation. If you die in circumstances where you could be an organ or tissue donor, a specialist nurse would check the NHS Organ Donor Register to see if you had registered a donation 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 NHS staff can ensure any particular conditions you wish to attach to your donation are taken on board.

One who performs selfless service, without thought of reward, shall attain his Lord and Master. (Sri Guru Granth Sahib p286 - Holy Sikh Scripture)

Only the good deeds which you have done shall remain with you, O my soul. This opportunity shall not come again! (Guru Granth Sahib p154)

Care and respect

The removal of organs and tissues is carried out with the greatest 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 normally be returned to the family for cremation straight after that.

Making your choice

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 for them to help ensure that your donation decision is honoured 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.

The Sikh Religion is based on the spiritual teaching of Guru Nanak, the first Guru (1469-1539)

"A Sikh believes in living an active, creative and practical life in truthfulness, self-control and purity. The Sikh philosophy and teaching supports the giving of others before oneself. Human organs are God's gift. According to the Sikh religion life continues after death in the soul and not the physical state. Therefore, donation of organs is both consistent with and in the spirit of Sikh teaching. Saving a human life is one of the greatest acts a person can do."

Mr Daljeet Singh Dilber, Glasgow Gurdwara

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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