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Organ Donation and Religious Beliefs



**A guide to organ and tissue
donation and Muslim beliefs**

Muslim 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 who have died 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 organ and tissue donation after death can 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 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, 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.

Islam and organ donation

There are differences of opinion among Muslims about organ donation. Deciding to donate one's organs is a very personal matter. Muslims who are concerned about making this decision in light of Islamic guidance should discuss these different opinions with their families, their local Imam or the hospital chaplain.

Sunni Muslim perspective

Historically, and also in the present day, many Muslims believe that organ donation is *haram*, prohibited. This is because the human body is considered sacred and the Prophet Muhammad, upon him be peace, said that the body remains sacred even after death and should not be harmed. He said that 'breaking the bones of the deceased is like breaking his bones when he is alive.'

Equally the Quran says that:
'If anyone saves a life, it is as if he saves the lives of all humankind'.

Thus many Muslims understand from this verse that donating one's organs is a blessed act.

In 1995, the Muslim Law (Sharia) Council UK issued a *fatwa*, religious edict, saying organ donation is permitted. In 2019, Mufti Muhammad Zubair Butt agreed in principle that it was permitted, but differed with the earlier opinion saying that organs can only be retrieved after the heart has stopped, whereas the first ruling said they can be removed after brainstem death.

Most recently, in 2020, Shaykh Dr Rifaqat Rashid has written further on the matter, once again evidencing the validity of the use of brainstem death as an accepted definition of death for organ retrieval from an Islamic perspective.

In summary, there are three positions Sunni Muslims might adopt in relation to donation after death. They may opt to:

1. Donate their organs after brainstem death (DBD) or circulatory death (DCD)
2. Donate their organs, but only after circulatory death
3. Not donate their organs

These are some comments from Sunni Imams and scholars in Scotland:

“Seeking knowledge about Organ Donation in Islam is important for every Muslim. People should consider this as an option and a form of Sadaqah Jariya (perpetual charity) as there is a dire need for it.”

(Dr Ibrahim Alwawi, Imam of Aberdeen Mosque)

“Only at the time of dire need and to save another person’s life is it permissible to donate. Dignity and care of the deceased has to be paramount just as you would the living.”

(Maulana Abdur Rehman Abid, Masjid al-Furqan, Glasgow)

“I am proud to have been on the Donor Register for many years. I am now more convinced than ever of the importance of organ donation and the great benefits it brings.”

(Shaykh Abdul Aziz Ahmed, Teacher at Madina Institute, Sout Ilahi and North Lanarkshire Council)

Shi'i Muslim perspective

Shia Muslims may opt to:

1. Donate their organs only after circulatory death (DCD)
2. Not donate their organs

Currently there are two main positions adopted by Shia Muslims, and a less known third position. (As Shia Muslims follow living jurists, it is very possible that the given positions may change once the mentioned jurists are replaced.)

Ayatullah Al-Sistani does not recognise the permissibility of organ donation after death (unless the life of a Muslim is dependant on such a transplant).

Ayatullah Khamenei does allow organ donation provided the body does not resemble a mutilated body. Donating internal organs would be permissible, but cutting off the external organs would amount to mutilation of the corpse, which is impermissible.

A third, less known position is that of Ayatullah Makaram Shirazi, which is similar to that of the late Ayatullah al-Khoei, stating organ donation (be it minor or major) after death is permissible, provided it is expressed clearly in the donor's will.

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 honour your decision. It will also ensure that, for example, if you are willing to donate organs or tissue following circulatory death, but not after brainstem death, that NHS staff can make sure this is taken on board.

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 be returned to the family for burial straight after that.

Making your choice

Whatever you opt for yourself or for your loved one, there is no stigma perceived from your decision by either NHS staff, other Muslims, or wider society.

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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