

Religious Views on Organ and Tissue Donation

When death visits, it can call attention to the importance of the spiritual dimension of life. When faced with the decision of organ and tissue donation during the trauma of a family member's death, a person's religious group's position on the subject suddenly becomes very important. The question often arises, "What does my religious tradition believe about organ and tissue donation"? Recent surveys indicate that less than 10 percent of those surveyed were aware of their religious group's doctrine or position regarding organ and tissue donation. As a result, the decision maker often looks to his or her parish clergy person or hospital chaplain for an informed answer about a particular religious group's position.

Religious groups have been on both the "cutting edge" of biomedical ethics and on the "slow to accept" end of the issue. No one person or even an assembly of religious representatives can speak for numerous religious groups. The "connectional" religious groups appear more likely to have official positions on subjects such as organ and tissue donation. The "Free Church" traditions champion the idea that no group can usurp the autonomy of the local congregation. Thus, the religious group's official resolution is not binding on the local congregation or individual persons. It is, therefore, difficult to state an official position for some of the nation's larger religious groups. Research shows, however, that the vast majority of religious groups do support organ and tissue donation and transplantation so long as it does not impede the life or hasten the death of the donor.

Research into the positions of various religious groups reveals the underlying attitude that unless the group has taken action to prohibit organ or tissue donation and transplantation, it is usually assumed that such donation is permissible. It is encouraged as a charitable act that saves and/or enhances life; therefore, it requires no action on the part of the religious group. Although this is a passive approach to affirming organ and tissue donation and transplantation, it seems to be the position of a large segment of the religious community. Some groups have taken a more pro-active stance in recent years, feeling that a resolution or adopted position encourages people to seriously consider the matter and plan accordingly. This segment appears to be increasing in number with only a few religious groups actively opposing organ and tissue donation and transplantation.

Each congregational clergy person is encouraged to research his or her religious group's tradition and position on organ and tissue donation and transplantation, as well as other biomedical ethical issues. In addition, each parish clergy person should keep abreast of any new resolutions or positions adopted at his or her religious group's national assembly. The group's position is subject to change in any given year. It is important to be informed, since the family member suddenly faced with making a decision concerning organ and tissue donation of a loved one may be depending on the clergy to know the position held by his or her religious group. Inability to make an informed decision could leave the family member with a feeling of guilt regardless of the decision he or she may make.

The following summary statements concerning the various religious groups' positions on organ and tissue donation and transplantation may be of assistance to you. Perhaps you can help your religious group adopt a more clearly defined position. A pro-active position does, indeed, help clarify a group's attitude on the subject. Your knowledge and action may alleviate the suffering of the thousands of people who die annually due to a lack of available donor organs and tissues while a multitude of healthy organs are being buried every day. This dilemma is within itself an ethical issue.

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AME & AME Zion

(African Methodist Episcopal) Organ and tissue donation is viewed as an act of neighborly love and charity by these denominations. They encourage all members to support donation as a way of helping others.

Amish

The Amish will consent to transplantation if they believe it is for the well being of the transplant recipient. John Hostetler, world-renowned authority on Amish religion and professor of anthropology at Temple University in Philadelphia, says in his book, *Amish Society*, "The Amish believe that since God created the human body, it is God who heals. However, nothing in the Amish understanding of the Bible forbids them from using modern medical services, including surgery, hospitalization, dental work, anesthesia, blood transfusions or immunization."

Assembly of God

The Church has no official policy regarding organ and tissue donation. The decision to donate is left up to the individual. Donation is highly supported by the denomination.

Baptist

Organ and tissue donation is supported as an act of charity. The Baptist Church leaves the decision up to the individual. The nation's largest Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, adopted a resolution in 1988 encouraging physicians to request organ donation in appropriate circumstances and to "...encourage voluntarism regarding organ donation in the spirit of stewardship, compassion for the needs of others and alleviating suffering."

Brethren

While no official position has been taken by the Brethren denominations, according to Pastor Mike Smith, there is a consensus among the National Fellowship of Grace Brethren that organ and tissue donation is a charitable act so long as it does not impede the life or hasten the death of the donor or does not come from an unborn child.

Buddhism

Buddhists believe organ and tissue donation is a matter of individual conscience and place a high value on acts of compassion. Reverend Gyomay Masao, president and founder of the Buddhist Temple of Chicago says, "We honor those people who donate their bodies and organs to the advancement of medical science and to saving lives." The importance of letting loved ones know your wishes is stressed.

Catholicism

Catholics view organ and tissue donation as an act of charity and love. Transplants are morally and ethically acceptable to the Vatican. According to Father Leroy Wickowski, Director of the Office of Health Affairs of the Archdiocese of Chicago, "We encourage donation as an act of charity. It is something good that can result from tragedy and a way for families to find comfort by helping others." Pope John Paul II has stated, "The Catholic Church would promote the fact that there is a need for organ donors and Christians should accept this as a "challenge to their generosity and fraternal love" so long as ethical principles are followed."

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

The Christian Church encourages organ and tissue donation, stating that we were created for God's glory and for sharing God's love. A 1985 resolution, adopted by the General Assembly, encourages, "... members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to enroll as organ donors and prayerfully support those who have received an organ transplant."

Christian Science

The Church of Christian Science does not have a specific position regarding organ donation. According to the First Church of Christ Scientist in Boston, Christian Scientists normally rely on spiritual instead of medical means of healing. They are free, however, to choose whatever form of medical treatment they desire – including a transplant. The question of organ and tissue donation is an individual decision.

The Church of the Nazarene

The Church of the Nazarene encourages its members who do not object personally to support donor/recipient anatomical organs through living wills and trusts. Further, they appeal for a morally and ethically fair distribution of organs to those qualified to receive them (Manual, Church of the Nazarene 1997 - 2001 paragraph 904.2).

Episcopal

The Episcopal Church passed a resolution in 1982 that recognizes the life-giving benefits of organ, blood and tissue donation. All Christians are encouraged to become organ, blood and tissue donors "...as part of their ministry to others in the name of Christ, who gave His life, that we may have life in its fullness."

Greek Orthodox

According to Reverend Dr. Milton Efthimiou, Director of the Department of Church and Society for the Greek Orthodox Church of North and South America, the Greek Orthodox Church is not opposed to organ donation as long as the organs and tissue in question are used to better human life, i.e., for transplantation or for research that will lead to improvements in the treatment and prevention of disease.

Gypsies

Gypsies are a people of different ethnic groups without a formalized religion. They share common folk beliefs and tend to oppose organ donation. Their opposition is connected with their beliefs about the afterlife. Traditional belief contends that for one year after death the soul retraces its steps. Thus, the body must remain intact because the soul maintains its physical shape.

Hinduism

According to the Hindu Temple Society of North America, religious law does not prohibit Hindus from donating their organs. This act is an individual's decision. H.L. Trivedi, in Transplantation Proceedings, stated that, "Hindu mythology has stories in which the parts of the human body are used for the benefit of other humans and society. There is nothing in the Hindu religion indicating that parts of humans, dead or alive, cannot be used to alleviate the suffering of other humans."

Independent Conservative Evangelical

Generally, Evangelicals have no opposition to organ and tissue donation. Each church is autonomous and leaves the decision to donate up to the individual.

Islam

The religion of Islam strongly believes in the principle of saving human lives. According to A. Sachedina in his Transplantation Proceedings (1990) article, Islamic Views on Organ Transplantation, "...the majority of the Muslim scholars belonging to various schools of Islamic law have invoked the principle of the priority of saving human life and have permitted the organ transplant as a necessity to procure that noble end."

The Muslim Religious Council initially rejected organ donation by followers of Islam in 1983; but it has reversed its position. The organs of Muslim donors must be transplanted immediately and not be stored in organ banks. According to Dr. Abdel_Rahma Osman, Director of the Muslim Community Center in Maryland, "We have no policy against organ and tissue donation as long as it is done with respect for the deceased and for the benefit of the recipient."

Jehovah's Witness

According to the Watch Tower Society, Jehovah's Witnesses believe donation is a matter of individual decision. Jehovah's Witnesses are often assumed to be against donation because of their opposition to blood transfusions. However, this merely means that all blood must be removed from the organs and tissue before being transplanted

Judaism

All four branches of Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist) support and encourage donation. According to Orthodox Rabbi Moses Tendler, Chairman of the Biology Department of Yeshiva University in New York City and Chairman of the Bioethics Commission of the Rabbinical Council of America, "If one is in the position to donate an organ to save another's life, it's obligatory to do so, even if the donor never knows who the beneficiary will be. The basic principle of Jewish ethics, 'the infinite worth of the human being,' also includes donation of corneas, since eyesight restoration is considered a lifesaving operation." In 1991, the Rabbinical Council of America (Orthodox) approved organ donation as permissible, and even required, from brain-dead patients. The Reform movement looks upon the transplant program favorably, and Rabbi Richard Address, Director of the Union of America Hebrew Congregation Bio-Ethics Committee and Committee on Older Adults, states that "Judaic Responsa materials provide a positive approach, and by and large the North American Reform Jewish community approves of transplantation."

The Lutheran Church of America

Lutherans passed a resolution in 1984 stating that donation contributes to the well being of humanity and can be "an expression of sacrificial love for a neighbor in need." They call on "members to consider donating... and to make any necessary family and legal arrangements, including the use of a signed donor card."

Mennonite

Mennonites have no formal position on donation, but are not opposed to it. They believe the decision to donate is up to the individual and/or his or her family.

Moravian

The Moravian Church has made no statement addressing organ and tissue donation or transplantation. Robert E. Sawyer, President, Provincial Elders Conference, Moravian Church of America, Southern Province, states, "There is nothing in our doctrine or policy that would prevent a Moravian pastor from assisting a family in making a decision to donate or not to donate an organ." It is, therefore, a matter of individual choice.

Mormon (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints)

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints believes the decision to donate is an individual one made in conjunction with family, medical personnel and prayer. Jerry Cahill, Director of Public Affairs for the Mormon Church, says, "Mormons must individually weigh the advantages and disadvantages of transplantation and choose the one that will bring them peace and comfort. The Church does not interpose any objection to an individual decision in favor of organ and tissue donation."

Pentecostal

Pentecostals believe that the decision to donate should be left up to the individual.

Presbyterian

Presbyterians encourage and support donation. They respect a person's right to make decisions regarding his or her own body.

Protestant

Protestants encourage and endorse organ donation. The Protestant faiths respect an individual's conscience and a person's right to make decisions regarding his or her own body. Reverend James W. Rassbach, Lutheran Board of Communication Services, Missouri-Synod, says "We accept and believe that our Lord Jesus Christ came to give life and give it in abundance. Organ donations enable more abundant life, alleviate pain and suffering and are an expression of love in times of tragedy."

Seventh-Day Adventist

Donation and transplantation are strongly encouraged. They have many transplant hospitals, including Loma Linda in California, which specializes in pediatric heart transplants.

Shinto

In Shinto, the dead body is considered to be impure and dangerous, and thus quite powerful. "In old belief context, injuring a dead body is a serious crime..." according to E. Namihira in his article, Shinto Concept Concerning the Dead Human Body. "To this day it is difficult to obtain consent from bereaved families for organ donation or dissection for medical education or pathological anatomy. The Japanese regard them all in the sense of injuring a dead body." Families are often concerned that they not injure the itai, the relationship between the dead person and the bereaved people.

Society of Friends (Quakers)

Organ and tissue donation is widely believed to be an individual decision. The Society of Friends does not have an official position on donation.

Unitarian Universalist

Organ and tissue donation is widely supported by Unitarian Universalists. They view it as an act of love and selfless giving.

United Church of Christ

Reverend Jay Lintner, Director, Washington Office of the United Church of Christ Office for Church in Society, states, "United Church of Christ people, churches and agencies are extremely and overwhelmingly supportive of organ sharing. The General Synod has never spoken to this issue because, in general, the Synod speaks on more controversial issues, and there is no controversy about organ sharing, just as there is no controversy about blood donation in the denomination. Any organized effort to get the General Synod delegates or individual churches to sign organ donation cards would meet with generally positive responses."

United Methodist

The United Methodist Church issued a policy statement regarding organ and tissue donation. In it they state, "The United Methodist Church recognizes the life-giving benefits of organ and tissue donation, and thereby encourages all Christians to become organ and tissue donors by signing and carrying donor cards or a driver's license, attesting to their commitment of such organs upon their death to those in need, as a part of their ministry to others in the name of Christ, who gave His life that we might have life in its fullness." A 1992 resolution states, "Donation is to be encouraged, assuming appropriate safeguards against hastening death and determination of death by reliable criteria." The resolution further states, "Pastoral-care persons should be willing to explore these options as a normal part of conversation with patients and their families."