

Harvard Brain Tissue Resource Center

RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES

Harvard Brain Tissue Resource Center

McLean Hospital

115 Mill Street

Belmont, MA 02478

1-800-BRAIN BANK

www.brainbank.mclean.org

Tissue Donation

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Postmortem Human

Brain Research

As advances continue to be made in research laboratories throughout the world, more and more people are beginning to appreciate the enormous potential of postmortem human brain research. What the public does not seem to realize, however, is that while promising results are being reported and our understanding of severe neurologic and psychiatric disorders is improving, more rapid progress is actually being delayed because of a scarcity of human brain donors.

Some people feel so strongly about the need for postmortem human brain research that they do not think twice about agreeing to donation. Many more, however, seem to find this decision to be a difficult and complicated one. It is a decision that causes many to contemplate their innermost feelings about death; whether or not there is an afterlife; what constitutes the soul during life and what happens to the body after death.

For centuries, religious leaders have been grappling with these very same issues. This brochure has been put together with the help of ministers, priests, rabbis, and medical ethicists, to provide answers to some of the religious questions you may have regarding organ and tissue donation.

"Is the decision to support essential research by donating brain tissue after death compatible with my religious beliefs?"

This is the question that many individuals need answered before deciding to become a brain donor or before choosing to donate the brain of a loved one. Though the answers vary from one denomination to another, it appears that the majority of religions do support postmortem brain tissue donation and research. While some faiths have very particular laws regarding the circumstances of donation, the mandate to heal and the call to compassion are recognized as fundamental to all religions.

PROTESTANTISM

While no one can speak with ultimate authority for Protestant Christianity because of the diversity of traditions and the lack of a single teaching authority, most denominations both endorse and encourage organ and tissue donation. At the same time, they stress respect for the individual conscience and a person's right to make decisions regarding his or her own body.

The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod was the first denomination to encourage organ and tissue donation by adopting a supportive resolution and by distributing the largest number of donor cards ever through an issue of their magazine, Lutheran Witness. Rev. James W. Rassbach of the Board of Communication Services, Missouri Synod, says, "We accept and believe that our Lord Jesus Christ came to give life and came to give it in abundance. Organ and tissue donation enables more abundant life, alleviates pain and suffering, and is an expression of love in time of tragedy."

CATHOLICISM

The Catholic Church has long supported organ and tissue donation. The consent to donate is seen as an act of charity, fraternal love, and self sacrifice. On the other hand, organ and tissue donation is not considered to be an obligation. For this reason, the free and informed consent of the donor or donor's family is imperative. The Church also specifies that in order to show respect for human life, respect for the author of life and respect for the person who once existed, dignity and reverence are due the remains of every human being. Therefore, organs and tissue should be removed only when there is sufficient reason to justify such an action.

Pope Pius XII was an early advocate of tissue donation and Pope John Paul II relied on his teachings. In 1956, Pius XII declared that

“the public must be educated.” He explained that to consent to autopsy or organ donation “in the interest of those who are suffering is in no violation to the dead...this consent can involve sadness and sacrifice for near relatives,” he explained, “but this sacrifice is glorified by the aureole of merciful charity toward some suffering brothers.”



JUDAISM

All four branches of Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist) support and encourage donation. According to Orthodox Rabbi Moses Tendler, “If one is in the position to donate an organ to save another’s life, it is obligatory to do so, even if the donor never knows who the beneficiary will be. In 1991 the Rabbinical Council of America approved organ donation as permissible.

Judaism teaches that all humans are created in the image of God and that every dignity must be extended to the human body in death as in life. Consequently, Jewish law sanctions the performance of autopsies only in certain, very limited circumstances. It is the consensus of rabbinical opinion that postmortem examination may be performed for the purpose of gaining specific information that will benefit the treatment of others already afflicted with a life-threatening illness. Similarly, most rabbinical authorities concur that a postmortem examination may be performed on a person who dies with a genetic disease in order to save the lives of children who may be afflicted with the same disease, even if the children whose lives will be saved have not yet been born.

GREEK ORTHODOX

According to Rev. Dr. Milton Efthimiou of 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 tissues 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.”



ISLAM

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



BUDDHISM

The Buddhists believe that the decision to donate organs or tissue is a matter of individual conscience. While there is no written resolution on the issue, 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.”



HINDUISM

Hindus are not prohibited by religious law from donating their organs according to the Hindu Temple Society of North America. This act is an individual decision.

JEHOVAH’S WITNESS

Jehovah’s Witnesses do not encourage organ and tissue donation, but believe it is a matter for individual conscience, according to the Watch Tower Society, the legal corporation for the religion.



CHRISTIAN SCIENTISTS

Although the Church of Christ Science takes no specific position regarding organ or tissue donation, most Christian Scientists rely on spiritual rather than medical means for healing. Most also feel that they can make their particular contribution to the health of society and their loved ones in other ways than through organ and tissue donation. The question of organ and tissue donation is an individual decision.



Due to the limited nature of this brochure, the Harvard Brain Bank was unable to include perspectives from all faiths. For those needing additional religious guidance, it may be helpful to discuss your questions and concerns with your own minister, priest or rabbi. While they may not have all the answers you are looking for, they will likely recognize and support your desire to contribute to a healthier tomorrow.

For further information regarding postmortem human brain research or to obtain a donor card, please contact the Harvard Brain Bank office.

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