BRAIN DEATH AND ORGAN DONATION: A COMPARISON OF THREE INFLUENTIAL GROUPS OF MUSLIM PROFESSIONALS

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ABSTRACT
Organ transplantation is a new treatment for end-stage organ failure. However, the total number of transplants performed in Malaysia in 2012 was only 94. Rates of deceased and living donors in Malaysia for 2012 were chronically low (0.55 and 1.87 per million population, respectively). A sample of 350 respondents in mosques, hospitals, and universities in various places in the Klang Valley, Kelantan and Pahang were collected between October and December 2013 to investigate the level of knowledge of health care professionals (HCPs), religious leaders (RLs), and academics (ACAs) and their stand on two issues on brain death. The result on the first issue (procuring organs from brain dead donors for transplantation) revealed that 52.8%, 23.7%, and 23.4% of HCPs, RLs, and ACAs, respectively, were in support of it; 30.2%, 31.8%, and 45.2% were uncertain about it; and 17%, 44.5%, and 31.5% were against it. On the second issue (terminating the life support machine of a brain dead person), 60.4%, 35.7%, and 25% of HCPs, RLs, and ACAs, respectively, were in support of it; 26.4%, 36.4%, and 38.7% were uncertain about it; and 13.2%, 27.7%, and 36.3% were against it. The lack of knowledge on Islam brain death-related issues should be addressed by educational efforts targeting these three groups of professionals. Special emphasis should be paid to educating RLs as they can channel their knowledge and perception to the other groups and to the Muslim public.

Keywords: brain death, knowledge, Malaysia, Muslim, organ donation

Introduction
Rapid medical progress has introduced organ transplantation as a new treatment for end-stage organ failure. The success of this new treatment depends vitally on the availability of donated organs. However, many countries around the globe have faced a severe organ shortfall, impeding the treatment of thousands of patients needing an organ transplant. In Malaysia, the number of dialysis patients in 2012 was 28,590, with about half registered on the waiting list for a renal transplantation; however, the total number of transplants performed in that year was only 94 (1,2). The major cause of this discrepancy was that rates of deceased and living donors in Malaysia for 2012 were chronically low (0.55 and 1.87 per million population, respectively) compared with other countries in the developed and developing world, such as Spain (35.12, 8.59), the United Kingdom (20.7, 17.8), Iran (8.7, 20), Turkey (5.0, 46.6), Kuwait (3.7, 16.7), and Saudi Arabia (2.5, 24.7) (3).

To address the dilemma of organ shortage, many studies have investigated factors affecting organ donation. Most such studies emphasise the importance of knowledge on organ donation and transplantation in determining willingness to donate organs (4–10). On the other hand, many authors have also identified the role of religion in guiding people’s viewpoints and attitude toward organ donation (7,11–1Generally, people become more willing to donate when they know that religious leaders (RLs) support organ donation (15). Muslim scholars or RLs are responsible for making Islamic rulings about contemporary issues and advising the Muslim public on those issues. The role of RLs is thus vital in driving up donation rates (15–18). In Turkey, a study showed that about 50% of Muslim RLs had been
with their theological beliefs – means the severe failure to procure donated organs for transplantation(21,22). Thus, the relatively low level of knowledge among HCPs shown in this study is a serious problem that needs to be addressed urgently to increase awareness on the issue of organ donation.

The inclusion of ACAs in this study provides us with two important elements. The first is to gauge their views on the issues searched, as ACAs are deemed to influence the nation’s future. The second is to provide an unbiased benchmark when comparing Rls and HCPs, since the topic investigated is medical-religious-oriented. As a result, this study reveals that ACAs exhibit the least acceptance and highest uncertainty about issues pertaining to brain death among the three groups. The comparison presented herein shows a wide gap between HCPs and Rls in terms of knowledge on the Islamic view of brain death issues. For instance, 52.8% of HCPs agree that removing organs from brain dead donors is permissible in Islam compared with 23.7% of Rls and 23.4% of ACAs.

The ambiguity and misconception among Islamic perspectives on brain death urge educational initiatives aiming to increase awareness of the Islamic permissibility of announcing brain dead patients as deceased and procuring their organs. These would enhance the number of approached donors and thus the number of organ transplantations in the country.

The need for educational efforts on brain death should intensively target Rls for three reasons. The first is that their level of knowledge on Islam brain death matters is very low. The second is that Rls can influence the public’s perception of organ donation more than other professional groups. The third is that Rls can serve as a reference of knowledge for HCPs and ACAs when they seek information on the Islamic perspective of brain death. Such an argument is supported by the recent findings that show that about 84% of Malaysian Muslim HCPs stress the important role of Rls in raising the awareness of and promoting organ donation(19).

This study has some limitations. It only covered the Klang Valley, and 2 hospitals in Kuantan, Pahang and Kota Bharu, Kelantan; thus, generalising the findings may suffer some bias. However, we argue that the demographic and urban characteristics of these areas mirror the component(s) of the Malaysian Muslim community, by and large. Another limitation is that the number of HCPs is much lower than the participants from other groups. Nevertheless, we believe that the samples roughly portray the relative formation of the three professions in the country.

Our analysis of 53 HCPs, 173 Rls, and 124 ACAs reveals that they lack adequate knowledge on the Islamic stance on brain death and the permissibility of procuring organs from brain dead donors. This lack of knowledge may have been undermining organ donation and transplantation activities in Malaysia, as brain dead donors are the ultimate source of organs. An educational strategy should be taken into account to address this deficit in information. We suggest that Rls need this education the most as key players in determining organ donation status in the Islamic community.

**Limitations and Future Studies**

This study was based on participants from 3 medical centres and 3 universities. The views of HCPs and ACAs in other institutions might be slightly different. In addition, the study did not investigate within-group differences because it initially aimed to compare influential groups (HCPs, Rls, and ACAs) without within-group settings. Future studies may cover a larger number of medical and academic institutions and may include within-group analysis.

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**References**