Muslims' views on the permissibility of organ donation: The case of Malaysia
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Background: Some argue that Malaysia's extremely low organ donation rate is attributed to religion, specifically Islam. Testing this argument, this study asked Malaysian Muslims their views regarding various issues on organ donation and examined whether their decisions to donate organs are framed by religious beliefs.

Materials and Methods: This study investigated the perspectives of Malaysian Muslims between October and December 2013 in Kuala Lumpur. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to 900 people, with 829 responses collected (92% response rate). Respondents' verbal consent was taken before proceeding with the survey.

Results: The survey found that more than half of respondents felt that organ donation is permitted in Islam and that it is a communal responsibility. However, the same proportions were unsure on the issues of rewards for organs or on whether Islam permits the procuring of organs from brain dead patients.

Conclusions: Malaysian Muslims are not against organ donation; however, encouraging organ donation requires the state to address public concerns on Islam's views on this sensitive issue through effective policy tools to help address these gaps in Malaysian Muslims' understanding of organ donation. The organ donation rate could improve by using Islamic scholars as ambassadors for an organ donation drive to convey the message of Malaysia's urgent need for organ donation.

Keywords: Islam; Malaysia; Muslims; organ donation; organ transplantation; perception on organ donation.

Introduction

The dramatic decline in the organ donation rate in Malaysia over recent decades is a cause for concern because the need for organs has steeply risen over the same period. Between 2000 and 2012, for example, the number of dialysis patients increased by more than 300%, from 6702 patients in 2000 to 28,590 in 2012. Against this background, only 94 (both living and deceased) kidney transplants were carried out in 2012 (compared with 32 in 2000).¹ Exacerbating this huge discrepancy, Malaysia's deceased donation rate stood at a paltry 0.48 per million population in 2008,² a status that is especially critical given its growing population and changing lifestyle patterns.

One immediate remedy to address Malaysia's organ shortage would be to persuade its Muslim population, which forms the bulk of the country's population, to donate organs. Many see this as a tall order, arguing that Muslims are less likely to donate their organs because they are unsure whether it is prohibited under Islamic law. This uncertainty is in part driven by the mixed signals from Muslim scholars, who are divided on the permissibility of organ donation. Recent international studies show that the majority of Islamic scholars permit organ donation.³ In Turkey for instance, 71% of Muslim religious leaders believe that organ donation is permitted in Islam.⁴ On the contrary, some scholars argue against organ donation, stating that such acts are tantamount to the abuse of the human body which belongs to Allah, and that meddling with a dead body is similar to hurting a living being.

Islam allows for such differences in opinion as long as they are substantiated by Islamic principles. The issue of organ donation and transplantation, for instance, falls under sharia'h law, or Islamic jurisprudence, where the primary references come from the Quran and Prophet Mohammad SAW guidance (Sunnah). However, if the Quran and Sunnah do not explicitly address such contemporary issues, sharia'h law allows Islamic scholars to deliberate on them and come up with stipulations, or fatwas. Muslims are then allowed to adopt the fatwas they see fit. For example, Muslim scholars are divided on what constitutes brain death, but there is now consensus in the Islamic community that brain death is consistent with the religious definition of death.⁵ Although some works still argue that equating brain death in
Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, the observations were collected from the Klang Valley only, while the views of Muslims in other states may not be exactly the same. Second, although we have explained the concepts of communal responsibility (fardu kifayah) and brain death to the respondents, we were not able to deliver comprehensive explanations on these concepts. That was mainly because of the limited time we had to explain these concepts to respondents.

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