

‘There are a lot of myths’: The misconceptions around religion and organ donation

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Monia Choudhary remembers sitting in the waiting room of an Indian hospital, and being asked what she thought about donating her father's organs.

"I actually said, 'are you kidding? He's alive, he's not dead. Why are you talking about organ donation?'" she recalled.

Monia, who moved to Australia 15 years ago, had flown back to India after her father suffered a brain haemorrhage. Not long after she arrived, he was declared brain dead.

Monia's father had wanted to donate his eyes, but the family hesitated, unsure of how that sat with their strong Hindu faith.

"We didn't want to do anything which is against the religion, so we consulted the priest and the pundits," Monia said.

It's a situation faced by many families

of faith, who are unsure of what to do when their religion intersects with a desire to donate organs.

Monia, her mother and four sisters received positive advice — Hindus believe only the body is mortal, not the soul.

"Nothing in the scripture says that it's against organ donation, so that was a big comfort," Monia said.

Hindus believe in reincarnation, so the family also asked if organ donation could affect their father's next life.

"Again we got that clearance that it is the soul that passes on, not the body," Monia said.

Organ donation would, however, interfere with some of the religious rituals that take place after death.

"In Hindu religion, before we cremate the body we wash the body, so it goes pure," Monia said.

"The doctors mentioned 'because the wounds are so fresh, you won't be able to'."

Despite some concern from some extended family members, in order to pursue organ donation, they decided to forego that particular ritual.

"It was bold and brave, especially for mum, to say 'that's OK— you can just touch his feet and let him go'," Monia said.

"He's gone — whether we wash his body or not, he's gone."

It's now three years since Monia's father died.

His eyes, kidney and liver were donated, and Monia has been told that helped five individual recipients.

As she accepted condolences for her father's death, Monia actively shared the lessons her family had learned about organ donation, to try and boost awareness in the Hindu community.

"When I talk to my community there are a lot of myths. It's important to discover whether it's a myth or a fact," she said.

Challenging the myths around donation

At Sunshine Hospital in Melbourne's

west, Alysia Panopoulos works for DonateLife, coordinating the organ donation process.

She has also encountered many religious misconceptions around organ donation.

"There are a lot of myths out there about donation, and the biggest one is probably [that] a person's religion could rule them out of organ donation," she said.

"In reality that's not often the case."

In fact, DonateLife says all major religions support organ and tissue donation as an act of compassion and generosity.

"But in saying that, what [one] family's religion means to them is very separate from what another family's religion means to them," Ms Panopoulos added.

A couple of religions do "generally say no" — Romani and Shinto, for example, do not allow organ donation.



Ms Panopoulos said in those cases she would still try to open up a conversation, even if the final decision didn't change.

"We don't classify a successful donation conversation as a 'yes'," she said.

"We classify it [as successful] if the family have been given all the information and they've made an informed decision that really is indicative of their loved one's wishes."

Ms Panopoulos recently worked with a Jewish family that had several requirements around donation.

"The family indicated that this donor needed to be buried quite quickly after she was deceased," she said.

"[It] was a matter of organising the donation operation to happen at a time that would facilitate the family getting her prepared for her burial as soon as they could."

She has also worked with a Buddhist family who supported donation, but the operation had to occur at a particular time.

"The family had consulted their spiritual nuns to find the best time for extubation to take place so that the patient can pass away and the donation operation can happen," Ms Panopoulos said.

"They had indicated quite a tight

timeframe — I think it was a timeframe of an hour that this patient needed to be declared deceased for donation to go ahead."

Logistically some of these requests can be difficult to meet, but Ms Panopoulos said her team does what it can to accommodate cultural and religious practices.

Ms Panopoulos said the whole donation process is guided by the donor families — and that includes incorporating religion and cultural practices.

"Part of what we do is exploring what is important to a family at end of life, [including] personal or cultural needs or religious needs," she said.

"We just want to open up that conversation really early, so we know what's important and try and accommodate as many needs as we can."