

Corneal Transplants in Islamic Countries

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In Islamic countries throughout the world, approximately 4,000 individuals are blinded each day due to diseases relating to the cornea. Vision in most of these individuals can be restored by corneal transplantation. For example, in the United States, vision in approximately 35,000 individuals is restored each year through corneal transplantation.¹ Unfortunately, a great majority of our visually disabled brothers and sisters in the Islamic countries have been unable to receive corneal transplantation mainly due to the difficulties in obtaining donor tissue. Donor tissue is collected by eye bank personnel after death only if the deceased has so indicated in a will or if it is the wish of the next of kin. In the United States there are 100 eye banks which collect approximately 55,000 donor eyes each year.¹ Eye banks exist in most Islamic countries but with few exceptions most of them collect very few eyes because the majority of Muslims are either unsure whether organ donation is permitted in Islam, or believe that it is actually prohibited.² As a result the benefits of corneal transplantation in most Islamic countries are available only to the rich, i.e. those who can afford to get an eye imported from the neighboring non-Islamic countries. For example, it is estimated that in Pakistan approximately 250,000 individuals are corneally blind and could be helped by transplants but during the last year only about 300 transplants were performed using the donor tissue imported mostly from Sri Lanka.³

A recent survey² conducted in five different Islamic centers in the United States to investigate the attitude and awareness of Muslims on the subject of organ donation identified three attitudinal groups: those who believe it is permitted (30%, n = 53), those who believe it is prohibited (16%, n = 28) and those who are not sure (54%, n = 95). The results are surprising and contrast with the following facts:

1. Two well known Islamic scholars, Jamal Badawi, Ph.D., of Nova Scotia, Canada and Hassan Hathout, M.D., of Southern California tell me that they know of nothing in the teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith that prevents Muslims from donating their organs upon death, to help others. Both scholars feel that such a gesture would be consistent with the teachings of Islam.
2. There are two active eye banks in Saudi Arabia and also two in Egypt. Both Saudi Arabian eye

banks, like most other eye banks in Islamic countries, are import eyebanks, i.e. they collect eye tissues from neighboring countries. In contrast, both eye banks in Egypt obtain almost all of its donor tissue from its own nationals. In both countries, large numbers of corneal transplants are routinely performed. It is highly unlikely that both countries (especially Saudi Arabia) would permit the operation of the eye banks if organ donation was prohibited in Islam.

3. The donor eyes are removed after death by a very respectful procedure. The eyelids are not mutilated in any way and are closed after removal of the eyes in such a way that it is impossible to tell that the eyes have been removed.
4. The importance of donation is obvious as it may help an otherwise incapacitated individual to live normal and productive life for many, many years. For example, a blind person receiving a corneal transplant in his/her twenties may go on to live a productive life for 50 more years. How many of us are able to help a person for 50 years during our life time? If we can do that after death why should we not go out of our way to grab this opportunity?

It has been said, "the comfort of donation is knowing that an incredible good can come out of something so tragic."⁴ Furthermore, the grieving family may derive comfort in remembering their loved one as one who could do something positive even in his/her own death. In my humble opinion, donating one's organs must carry enormous rewards from Allah. Unlike the opportunity to donate a large sum of money for a good cause, which is restricted to the rich, the opportunity to donate organs is open to the rich and poor alike.

Given the results of our survey² and the paucity of corneal transplantation in Islamic countries, there is clearly a need for educational programs, active discussions and publications on the subject of Islamic perspective on organ donation. It is the hope of the author that various Islamic scholars, "Muftis" and official Islamic organizations will write to the Editor of The Journal of Islamic Medical Association expressing their views on this subject. One wonders how ibn al-Haitham, an innovative and renowned Muslim eye specialist of the eleventh century and the author of the first book ever written on the eye, would have responded to this editorial!

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