

ISLAM AND TREATMENT OF END-STAGE

RENAL DISEASE

Islam is a complete way of life. It organizes all aspects of life for Muslims. It has a say in each and every issue that may confront Muslims, even today. Two contemporary issues have been raised by some Muslims, for which they want to know Islam's position.

They are the following:

1) A person suffering from kidney failure so that he cannot survive unless he has access to a certain machine that purifies his blood from his waste products and extra fluid. This process is called dialysis, which he has to undergo on a regular basis. Thus, it would cost him a lot of money if not covered by any plan. Nephrologists say that such a person would die if he stops this process. The question here is this: Does Islam allow such a person to stop dialysis even if it means losing his life? I consulted a well-known Muslim scholar in Canada who said that yes, such a person is free either to continue using the machine or to stop. I asked how that could be. Does Islam allow a Muslim to kill himself knowingly? Is not such an act one way to commit suicide? The scholar nodded for a moment and then said, this is not my personal judgment. It is rather the view of the majority of Muslim scholars. I asked on what basis they gave this judgment. Smiling, the scholar said, first of all, Islam has a unique position on medicine as such. It believes that it is Allah Almighty who heals from all illnesses. Medicine is only a means to that end. Yes, a Muslim is encouraged to see a doctor when he or she is ill. This is clear from one saying of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, who said: "Seek medication O slaves of Allah, for Allah has made for every illness a medicine." This, however, is not a must; it is only a recommendation. That is why we read in the Quran about Ibrahim (A), father of numerous prophets, who described Allah, among other things, to be the one who grants him healing whenever he becomes sick. So a Muslim adheres himself to Allah, praying to Him to grant him sound health and restore his

health every time he is deprived of it. Yes, one should seek treatment through going to a medical doctor, but he can also use other methods of treatment. One of them is prayer, and he may do nothing at all beyond that. This stems from a Muslim's trust in Allah. The Quran also mentions another prophet Job who was terminally ill and was reduced to a pile of bones. He, however, never lost hope in Allah and continued to appeal to Him until Allah commanded him to take a cold shower, which he did and regained his sound health. Let us thus differentiate between two things. One is to seek any medical and viable treatment while never losing sight of a basic fact: It is Allah who brings back sound health, not medicine. The other is to imagine that medicine is the healer, which borders on disbelief. Yes, we should exert our utmost in seeking medical treatment, but if it is beyond our capacity, then we are free to stop what we cannot afford.

2) The other issue is that of an organ transplant. Does Islam allow this operation? In other words, is it permissible to take one organ or more from one healthy person and give it to another who needs it for his or her survival? The answer is a qualified yes. This is not a personal view. It was rather discussed in one session of the World Assembly of Islamic Jurists held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in February 1988. The assembly emphatically said that a Muslim can benefit using the organs of another human being, both alive and dead. One may initially raise his eyebrows in astonishment. To explain this, they added that given the advanced research in medicine and jurisprudence concerning this issue, and after reviewing the positive results in this area for the benefit of man, they allowed organ transplant within a certain framework that would safeguard the dignity of man and prevent all psychological, social and other harms that might be caused by it. They started with definitions and said by organs they mean any part of the human body, including tissues, cells, blood and the like, for example the cornea, whether that organ is still part of the body or separated from it. By benefit, they mean the use the beneficiary of that organ or organs for the

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necessity of keeping life or preserving a fundamental function of the human body, such as eyesight. Organ transplants have three sources: from a living body, from a dead body or from an embryo.

For living bodies, there are two cases. A transplant can mean taking an organ from one part of a living body to another of the same, such as a transplant of skin, bones, veins, blood and the like, known as homograft. Another case is to transplant from one living body to another, called a heterograft. In this case, the organ is either one on which the donor's life depends or one on which life doesn't depend. It might be an individual organ or not.

The first is like the heart and liver, while the second is like the kidneys and lungs. Organ for which the donor's life depends might be one that has a fundamental function or not; it might also be one that is regenerable, such as blood, or one that is not.

It is allowed to transplant one organ of a human body from one part to another, provided that it is essential

and that the good expected of the operation outweighs the harm. An organ transplant from one human body to another, if the organ is regenerable, such as blood or skin, or if it is a duplicate organ, such as a kidney or part of an organ, is also allowed if it doesn't harm the donor's life. It allowed to benefit from a part of an organ that was removed due to illness, such as taking the cornea of someone whose eye was removed due to illness.

It is forbidden to perform an organ transplant on an organ on which life depends. It is also forbidden to perform this operation if it results in stopping an important function of the human body, even if it does not risk the life of that body. It is allowed to take an organ from a dead person to a living one after taking due permission. Organs should not be offered for sale because that is an insult to human life, considered sacred in the sight of Islam. If the money is voluntarily given by way of reward or donation, then it is allowed.