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## Gurch Randhawa

# Fighting the organ transplant crisis: what can schools do?

Gurch Randhawa has just completed a study funded by the King's Fund on *Organ Donation among Asians*, and has been involved in the consultation process with the Advisory Group on the Ethics of Xenotransplantation set up by the Department of Health.

*Schools should encourage active discussion of organ donation.*

There has been a recent revival in media interest in the area of organ donation and transplantation due to the possibility of using animals as potential organ sources. The underlying issue that needs to be addressed, however, is increasing the supply of human cadaver organs, many of which are not utilised.

The majority of donors die as a result of a road accident which is also the main cause of death in young people. Consequently, research has shown that a greater proportion of potential donors die in the younger age groups, particularly in the 10–39 age group. However, another unfortunate trend is that many of these families refuse consent to organ donation due to lack of discussion.

### Helping parents to talk about it

Schools are an obvious resource to overcome such a problem through the use of sensitive education and counselling to children and their families. Many parents have no idea what their children's wishes are in respect to organ donation. Many students don't even know what their parents' wishes are. The fact is that in the event of a tragedy, a family may be asked to make a decision about organ donation. If the family have never discussed it, they are left with a very difficult and confusing decision.

Schools have an important role to play in tackling this problem. They should encourage active discussion of the possibility of organ donation both at school and at home with the family. Through raising awareness of organ

donation and transplantation in children, the number of refusals would hopefully decrease thereby increasing the number of transplants performed and lives saved.

### The major cause of death

Patients who are normally considered to be organ donors are those who have suffered some form of head injury (brain damage) commonly as a result of a road accident. A greater proportion of potential donors die in conditions favourable to kidney donation in the younger age groups, particularly those who are 10–39 years old (Salih et al, 1991). This is corroborated with the fact that although deaths from road accidents have decreased over recent years due to improvements in roads, transport, safety measures and treatment of injuries, this still remains the major single cause of death in the 0–14, 15–24, and 25–34 age groups, indicating that these groups may be potential organ donors. The following statistics relate to deaths from road-traffic accident (Department of Health, 1992):

- After the age of five, most deaths are caused by road traffic accidents; usually the child is a pedestrian.
- Nearly twice as many boys as girls die as a result of accidents.
- Road traffic accidents are the single largest cause of accidental death in young adults aged 15–24.
- Nearly 50% of deaths in men and 30% of deaths in women in this age group are as a result of an accident.

Research has shown, however, that the families of potential donors aged 20–39 (62%) were less likely to give permission for organ donation mainly as a result of lack of prior discussion about the subject (Salih et al., 1991).

### How schools can help

By its very nature, organ donation is not a common topic of conversation due to its link with the time of a loved one's death. However, at such a time, a family may be asked to consider consenting to donating the organs of their loved one. This decision is made all the more difficult if parents have no idea what their children's wishes are in respect to organ donation and vice versa. Schools can play an active role in addressing this problem through raising awareness surrounding organ donation and transplantation; initiatives could include:

- School newsletter
- Posters
- PSE curriculum
- Special seminars for parents or children
- Teachers' seminars with health professionals

The PSE component of the National Curriculum could easily incorporate such issues. The Department of Health and Transplant co-ordinators should liaise with schools to provide them with information packages containing posters, leaflets, and contact numbers and addresses for schools wanting education on organ donation and transplantation issues.

Teachers at those schools interested in participating with this enterprise should be invited by health promotion agencies to study days where they have the opportunity to discuss issues regarding organ donation and transplantation with members of an expert panel of health professionals, recipients, donor families and transplant co-ordinators. It is imperative that school staff should be aware of the many people awaiting transplants, many of whom are children (Randhawa, 1995). This information could be used to develop material for discussion in PSE classes. In addition, schools could run seminars for interested parents and children.

Pupils at secondary schools all undertake some form of education concerning health and social matters, commonly known as Personal & Social Education (PSE). The content and delivery of the PSE curriculum is quite varied from

school to school but generally covers topics such as advice on hygiene, coping with and eradicating bullying, misuse of drugs and alcohol, careers advice, sex education, HIV/AIDS and the dangers of smoking.

Newsletters, which are sent to children's homes detailing school activities, are now an integral part of most schools. These also provide an ideal medium in which to convey messages about organ donation and transplantation to the family, the aim of which is to initiate a dialogue concerning such issues. Children would be able to utilise the information and ideas they have discussed during their PSE classes.

### The parents need to know

Such initiatives taken by schools should emphasise the need for the family to be informed of an individual's decision on donation, regardless of whether it is for or against. This can be achieved by giving children and their parents as much related information as possible:

- A brief history of transplantation
- Who can become an organ donor?
- How to become an organ donor
- The organ donation/transplantation process

Schools are an obvious resource to overcome such a problem, although it is accepted that issues around life and death are difficult for teachers to undertake. Greater use should be made of existing information literature in this area, such as Department of Health leaflets, posters, and videos, which are all available free of charge. Transplant co-ordinators, part of whose role is to educate the public should also be invited along to give special seminars.

Closer links should be forged between these agencies and schools in attaining the goal of educating the local community. Through raising awareness of organ donation and transplantation in children and their families, the number of refusals to organ request would hopefully decrease, thereby increasing the number of transplants performed and lives saved.

### References

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*Schools should emphasise the need for the family to know what the individual's wishes are.*

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