



When death gives a fresh start

After demise, organs return to dust, but if donated in time, a single donor can save several lives

Viney Kirpal

vineykirpal@gmail.com

In recent episodes of his radio broadcast *Mann Ki Baat*, Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke movingly about two grieving families. One was from Amritsar, whose 39-day-old baby died after severe medical complications. Another had lost their 10-month-old child in a tragic accident. In the middle of unbearable loss, both families chose to donate their children's organs so that other children might live.

Act of compassion

Their decision transformed private grief into a public act of compassion. Looked at differently, organ donation can change the meaning of death. What is seen as a moment of sorrow can also become a moment when one life quietly gives life to others.

Medical science today can replace failing hearts, kidneys, livers, lungs, corneas, hands, and uterus. Transplants offer thousands of patients a second chance at life. Yet the greatest obstacle is not surgical

skill; it is the shortage of organs, as 80,000 wait for an organ.

In India, organ donation is governed by the Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues Act. The law recognises three pathways through which organs can be donated.

The first is living donation. A healthy person, usually a close relative, can legally donate one kidney or a portion of the liver. Because the body can function normally with one kidney and the liver regenerates, the donor continues to live a healthy life.

The second pathway is deceased donation after brain-stem death, occurring usually after an accident. Brain-stem death occurs when the part of the brain that controls breathing, consciousness, and vital reflexes permanently stops functioning. The heart may still appear to beat because a ventilator pushes oxygen into the lungs, but medically the person has died. Once a specially authorised panel of doctors certifies brain-stem death as strictly defined in law, organs may be retrieved if the family consents.

A third pathway, increasingly discussed worldwide, is donation after circulatory death (DCD). Here the patient is not brain-dead but recovery is medically impossible. When life support is withdrawn and the heart finally stops beating, organs may be retrieved within a short window before they deteriorate. Many countries are expanding this form of donation, and it may become more common in India as awareness grows.

Despite these legal provisions, India's deceased organ donation rate remains among the lowest in the world. Most organs still come from living donors of kidney and liver.

My own journey has shown me how precious each donated organ is. When I was recovering in the ICU after my heart transplant, I remember seeing a beautiful infant in another bed who desperately needed donor lungs. Because suitable organs for babies are so rare, he waited nearly three years before a match was finally found.

Children often suffer the most from this shortage.

Yet every one of us carries within our body organs that could save lives. After death, these organs eventually return to dust. But if donated in time, a single donor can save several lives and restore sight to many more.

Even when age or illness makes major organs unsuitable for transplant, tissues such as corneas, skin, bones and heart valves can still help patients.

Many families hesitate because they fear the body will be disfigured. In reality, organ retrieval teams treat the donor with great dignity. The body is carefully reconstructed so that the funeral can take place exactly as the family wishes.

The real challenge is not medical but emotional. Families must make a decision in the midst of grief. That decision becomes easier when individuals, have in their lifetime expressed their wish to donate to their loved ones.

If more Indians pledged their organs and informed their families, countless lives could be saved.

Death will come to all of us one day. But in that final moment we can choose to leave behind something more than memory. We can leave behind life itself. And in doing so, we discover a quiet form of immortality — a heartbeat, a breath, a ray of sight continuing somewhere in the world because we once lived.