

'No practice of organ donation in our country'

Saving lives is an idea that has always inspired Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw in her work as chairman and managing director of biopharma company, Biocon. It has also inspired her to pledge her organs for donation and to speak up for the cause. She tells Rohith B R that India has a long way to go because of low awareness about the issue

Why is organ donation such a critical issue?

Every year hundreds of lives are lost as they don't have access to vital organs that can be harvested. It is very important for every one of us to know that we can save several lives if we donate our organs. This is what I mean by life after death.

We are losing very valuable organs because there's no practice of organ donation in India. We cremate bodies with the organs intact. These are healthy organs which can be made use of to save people's lives.

Is there very low awareness in India?

There is no awareness. Understanding of cadaver organs and how they can be used is simply not



there. There is a need for an intensive drive in this regard. I am glad that The Times of India Group has taken up this initiative.

Are cultural and religious beliefs a major problem?

Many Indians believe that one should not tamper with dead bodies. But they don't understand that they are losing an opportunity to save other lives. We should be led by science and work positively to bring changes in society.

Should there be any policy intervention as some regulations for organ donation are cumbersome?

I don't think you can enforce any policy in this regard. Encouraging people to pledge organs voluntarily would go a long way. As individuals and as families, we should realize the need for it.

Have you pledged your organs?

Yes, I have pledged because I believe that my organs can save many lives in future.

Life Can Begin After Death

Lakhs of organ-failure patients across India need a transplant to stay alive. The only way to meet the galloping demand is donation after death. But for most of us, the idea is still alien and unbearable. It needn't be so

Malathy Iyer | TNN

Kidney transplants started in India in the early seventies. The infamous Indian kidney bazaar emerged soon thereafter; unscrupulous middlemen flourished as they manipulated the poor to sell their kidneys to rich patients.

The Transplantation of Human Organs Act was passed in 1994 to stop this illegal and unethical 'trade'. It introduced the concept of brain death, an irreversible condition in which the brain stops functioning but the heart lingers on for a few days. Persons caught in such a limbo are the only ones who can donate organs such as heart, lungs, kidneys, liver, etc for transplantation into patients suffering from organ failure. Brain-dead patients can thus become deceased donors and cut the dependency on live donations, or so felt experts who were drafting TOHA.

But 19 years after this Act, India has little to show in terms of cadaveric organ donation. Kidney scams were unearthed in a major police crackdown some years ago. But the organ donation story has been a virtual non-starter. Statistically speaking, 232 Indians per million population need a kidney transplant every year. Many others suffer from failure of the heart, lungs, liver and other vital organs. But India doesn't even manage to get 232 cadaveric donations in a year (see box). Deceased donors account for barely 4% of the donor pool, with live donations by relatives accounting for most trans-



ANGUISHED EYES | Bangalore's M Murugan, 31, says he wants to live so he can see his four-year-old daughter grow into a young woman. The security guard used to work as a driver until his liver and kidneys started failing because of a genetic disorder. He needs a liver and kidney transplant and is waiting for a donor. He also needs Rs 30 lakh for the operation. His wife Geetha M says, "I can't bear to see him suffering the pain of dialysis thrice a week. Doctors say the solution is organ transplantation and we need help to get it done." Last year, according to an estimate, India had less than 200 deceased organ donations. The demand for vital organs runs into lakhs. For many Murugans across the country, time is fast running out.



plants. The organ-failure patient is still as helpless as ever.

So what went wrong?

First, the concept of brain death and deceased donation is still an alien idea in most states, barring Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat and a few others. "The government clearly needs to do much

more to educate people on organ donation," says surgeon Sandeep Guleria from Indraprastha Apollo Hospital in Delhi.

The Union government is in the midst of setting up a national organ-sharing body; a draft of the changes in the law has been put up online for feedback.

Second, even medical pro-

professionals shy away from brain death. The paperwork and responsibility associated with such declarations are time-consuming. Before the Tamil Nadu government came up with the country's only thriving deceased donor programme in 2008, an administrative survey in the state showed reluctance among neurosurgeons to take on the responsibility to certify brain death. Immediately, a government resolution was passed to make reporting of brain death mandatory.

Urologist Sunil Shroff from Chennai estimates that over one

lakh brain deaths occur every year in India. "At any given time, every major city would have 8-10 brain deaths in various ICUs," he adds. He recommends that existing law be simplified to facilitate brain death certification and donation.

There's also the matter of trust. A study among doctors, nurses and patients in AIIMS, Delhi, in the nineties showed that transparency in distribution of organs was important. "We found that the system has to be whiter than white. It has to be transparent if people have to believe in it," recalls Dr Guleria, who conducted the study in AIIMS then.

Dr Vatsala Trivedi, who was the founder-secretary of Mumbai's Zonal Transplant Coordination Centre, feels the trust problem can be solved if public hospitals became active about cadaver donation. "A programme gets standardized only when it's implemented in public hospitals. Private institutions will be looked at with suspicion of profiteering when they introduce systems," she says.

Dr Mahesh Desai from Nadiad in Gujarat feels the government should provide financial support to transplantation programmes. "It is an expensive process. It would help patients to have government support." He says the Chennai model in which patients are provided medicines by the government should be replicated throughout the country.

To pledge your organs, log on to www.ileadindia.com

WAYS OF HOPE

> In 2008, Tamil Nadu appointed an administrator to chart out its deceased donor programme; issued a diktat to hospitals to identify brain death compulsorily, and floated a novel organ-sharing formula between public and private hospitals. It works well; in 2012, it managed to get 78 cadaver donations.

> Andhra Pradesh's Jeevandan scheme has streamlined procedures and deceased donor numbers have doubled — from 13 in 2012 to 24 in the first half of 2013. It has helped 100 patients in 7 months.

> Karnataka last year introduced the option of organ donor on driving license cards. "Over 40,000 people have been made aware about organ donation and over 19,000 have pledged organs in the last 10 months," says Priyanka Shylendra of Gift Your Organ Foundation in Bangalore.

> After the death of a former CM — Vilasrao Deshmukh — due to organ failure, Maharashtra managed its highest donation ever of 26 donors in 2012. Taking a leaf out of the Tamil Nadu model, it has started issuing general notifications to smoothen the cadaver donation process.

SKewed STORY

ORGAN DONATION IN NUMBERS

196

is the estimated number of brain-dead donors in 2012 — the most successful year for deceased organ donation in India



34

organs and tissues can be harvested from a brain-dead donor. This includes a heart, 2 lungs, 2 kidneys, liver, 2 corneas, etc



0.16 per million Indians — or less than 1 per million was an organ donor (in 2012)

1,40,000

Indians die in road accidents every year

90,000

of them are left brain-dead



50% of all organ donation needs could be met by using organs from road mishap casualties

2lakh

cornea donations needed annually



50k

corneas donated

21k

Indians require kidney transplant every year

3-4k

Indians get kidney transplant every year



150

mostly in metros, capable of organ transplant