

Short Review



Navigating the challenges of Body donation: Duties of donors, families, and medical institutions- A short review

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ABSTRACT:

Background: Cadaveric dissection has been central to anatomical learning since the era of *Acharya Sushruta*, and Voluntary body donations (VBD) are considered as generous contribution to the humanity. Body Donation is a kind and selfless act of giving one's body after death which helps to advance medical knowledge and benefit future generations. Although body donation plays a crucial role in enhancing medical education and advancing the field of medical science, the practice of cadaveric donation still faces significant challenges. In many medical colleges dissection classes and research activities are being hold because of lack of availability of cadavers. Under Anatomy Act of India, the unclaimed bodies are not always suitable for dissection and mostly they are not useful for medical purpose; The only reliable source of cadavers for these classes and studies is through body donation. However, there is a lack of awareness among the public about this gracious and noble act of body donation.

Objective: To explore the Ayurvedic, ethical, and educational dimensions of body donation, several active trusts involved in VBD and to analyse its challenges and responsibilities within medical education. **Methods:** A narrative literature review of Ayurvedic scriptures, ethical policies, and existing body donation frameworks was conducted. Observations were made under classical concepts, modern regulatory aspects, challenges, and Responsibilities. **Results:** The review highlighted that several active trusts in India — including Dadhichi Deh Dan Samiti, Laksha Trust, Dr. Ramannavar Charitable Trust, and the JSS Body Donation Association - serve as key contributors to donor registration and timely cadaver procurement for medical education. Major barriers to body-donation programmes include limited public awareness, cultural and religious influences, and legal compliance issues, while initiatives integrating community outreach and ethical transparency show promise in improving public acceptance. **Conclusion:** Body donation represents a unique bridge between ancient Ayurvedic thought and modern anatomical education. Active body-donation trusts significantly support cadaver availability for medical education, but wider participation requires strengthening awareness, institutional policies, and culturally sensitive counselling can significantly improve cadaver access in medical colleges.

KEYWORDS: Anatomy act, Body Donation, Cadaveric Dissection, *Shavavichhedana Vidhi*, Voluntary body donation (VBD).

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1. INTRODUCTION:

Cadavers continue to serve as a major resource for teaching and learning in the fields of medicine and anatomy. Voluntary Body donation, Anatomical donation or Body Bequest, these are the commonly used terms which all are synonyms. Anatomy is a study which focuses on understanding the different structures of the human body, including how various parts are arranged and function together. Having a good understanding of anatomy is really important for medical students to start their careers and become good, effective doctors later on. The study of anatomy mainly depends on the practice of dissection on cadavers, which is an essential part of understanding the human body. However, there is a global shortage of cadavers, making it difficult for medical students and professionals to get sufficient training. To address this issue, body donation has become the primary and most common source of cadavers around the world. The donation of bodies is governed by various laws and regulations that differ from country to country, ensuring that the process is conducted ethically and legally. In India the anatomy act [1] was introduced in 1948 with a goal to ensure the unclaimed bodies of deceased persons can be used by hospitals, medical colleges and teaching institutions for the purpose of anatomical examinations and dissection. The purpose of this article is to discuss a short review on history of body donation, eligibility, procedure of Body donation, trusts actively participate in VBD in India, challenges and responsibilities of institutions in India. [2]

2. METHODOLOGY

History

The first human cadaver was dissected by Andreas Vesalius. Anatomy act was established in 1948 and which was uniformly adopted by every state in India. It regulates the use of dead bodies for medical teaching purpose. Any individual can donate the body and any hospital or medical institution that has been officially recognized and approved by the respective state government is authorized to receive such donated bodies for educational and research purposes. [3] The body of Pandurang Shridar Apte was India's first body donation which was donated to B.J Medical College, Pune. [4]

Shavavichhedana Vidhi as per Acharya Sushruta:

For dissecting purposes, a cadaver of a person who did not die away due to poisoning, a serious long-term illness, or an accident, and which is fully intact in all its parts, should be chosen for the purpose of study. For the preparation and placement, the body is carefully wrapped in materials such as grass, bark, or a cage, and then positioned in a hidden spot within a river's flow or a stagnant body of water. It is left there for seven nights, allowing the body to decompose naturally without being eaten by animals. After seven nights, when the body has started to decompose and the structures have become loose, it is removed from the water. The dissection process is carried out with great care, using tools that are not sharp. Instead, the body is gently rubbed with brushes made from natural fibres, such as: *Ushira, Bala, and Balvaja*. This method of using brushes allows the student to slowly and carefully examine the body layer by layer. As decomposition progresses, the

skin, muscles, blood vessels, nerves, and bones naturally separate. This process enables the student to observe and understand the human body in detail through a visual and tactile approach, providing a thorough insight into human anatomy. [5]

Who are eligible to Donate and accept the body:

According to the Bombay Anatomy Act, Section 5 B (1), if any person, at any time, either in writing or orally in the presence of two or more witnesses, has made a promise to donate their body for the purpose of medical education or research, including anatomical examination and dissection, then such a declaration is considered valid, Legal heirs can donate the body after the death of the person, and unclaimed bodies can be donated by anatomy act law. Any hospital or medical institution that has been officially recognized and approved by the respective state government is authorized to accept the body.

Procedure of body donation:

- Voluntary body donation forms are available in approved medical colleges and duly filled form with signatures of legal heirs has to be submitted. Body can be donated even if the form is not filled.
- The Following documents are needed for body donation:
 - A Death certificate-issued by registered medical professional/ government registered hospital.
 - An application by next kin/ close relative, and Body will be accepted after document verification.

- After the death of the donor, the next kin / near relative should inform to the approved medical institution, preferably within 3 to 5 hours.

Suitability of a body for donation:

When a body is donated, it is intended to be used for studying the normal structure of the human body. However, not all donated bodies are suitable for use, and some may be rejected for various reasons.

- The following are some common causes that lead to the rejection of a body:
 - A body that belongs to a medico-legal case, such as suicide, homicide, or accidental death.
 - A body that has already undergone a postmortem examination.
 - A body belonging to a person who had a contagious or communicable disease, such as HIV, AIDS, Tuberculosis, Hepatitis B and C etc.
 - A body that is in an advanced state of decomposition.
 - A body that is either extremely obese or severely undernourished (emaciated).
 - A body where certain organs have been removed, except for the eyes.
 - A body of a person suffering from skin-related conditions likes psoriasis or bedsores.

Trusts actively working in body-donation programs in India

Voluntary body donation in India is increasingly facilitated by a network of dedicated trusts, charitable organisations, and medical-college-linked associations that streamline donor registration, coordinate with families, and ensure the prompt transfer of remains for

anatomical education, surgical training, and research. These organisations serve as crucial operational partners by maintaining structured donor databases, organising transportation and interim preservation when required, and overseeing compliance with medico-legal and institutional guidelines. Their efforts help guarantee that donated bodies are handled with ethical integrity and utilised with dignity throughout the educational and research processes. Among the most recognised and long-standing bodies supporting voluntary donation is the Dadhichi Deh Dan Samiti, which operates in Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR), is committed to raising awareness about body, organ, eyes, and stem cell donation. The organization actively encourages people to take a solemn pledge during their lifetime to donate their body or organs after they pass away. It also ensures that these pledges are carried out properly and respectfully according to the donor's wishes, and it has been working in this important cause in the Delhi and NCR areas since 1997. It maintains an active donor registry, conducts regular awareness activities, and coordinates the handover of bodies and organs to affiliated medical institutions across the region.[6] Community-based organisations such as the Lakshya Trust have similarly broadened their initiatives to include public education on cadaver and cadaver-tissue donation, aligning these efforts with their wider health-promotion programmes. These trusts ensure that donor intentions are formally documented and honoured at the time of death. [7] Institutional associations linked to medical colleges—such as the JSS Voluntary Body Donation Association was established in

the year 1996, under this foundation till date 3730 bodies were registered and 519 of them were donated for different medical colleges. This college-level programmes maintain formal voluntary-donor registries, issue standardised donor-declaration forms, and follow defined SOPs for receiving, preserving, and utilising donated bodies for undergraduate and postgraduate anatomy training. [8] Dr. Ramannavar Charitable Trust (2009) and the Dr. Ramannavar Foundation, Bailhongal (DRFB, 2015), were established in honour of the late Dr. Ramannavar, who had pledged his own body for anatomical study—a wish later fulfilled by his son, Dr. M. B. Ramannavar. The Trust comprises three members and the DRFB has seven active members, with Dr. M. B. Ramannavar serving as Secretary for both. The foundation is registered under the Government of Karnataka (Reg. No. BLG-4-00001-2009-10; BLGD5). DRFB primarily maintains a registry of body pledgers and coordinates timely communication with medical institutions upon a donor's death. To date, more than 1500 individuals have registered, and many cadavers have been donated to various Medical, Ayurveda, Homeopathy, and Unani colleges across Karnataka. Notably, even a temple head priest has pledged his body. The foundation functions entirely on a charitable basis. A major focus of the foundation is public education on body and organ donation, for which it has conducted over 80 awareness programs across Belagavi district and other regions. Many of these efforts have become more successful because of the involvement of community leaders and religious figures, who play a key role in encouraging people to support body donation.

This can be clearly seen in one particular awareness campaign about body donation, where 108 adult residents from a village called Shegunasi, located in the state of Karnataka, made a public promise to donate their bodies after death.

3. DISCUSSION

Challenges in Body Donation:

Barriers to accessing a body donation programme

A recent study on trends in body donation worldwide was done and collected data from 68 different countries. Out of these, 22 countries (32%), rely solely on bodies that are donated voluntarily by individuals who have given their consent. Another 21 countries (31%), depend entirely on unclaimed bodies. Even in the 21st century, a majority of countries, specifically 45 out of the 68, continue to use unclaimed bodies for purposes like anatomical dissections and research.[10]

- In India, the law permits the use of unclaimed bodies for dissection purposes. This provision applies specifically to the states of Maharashtra, Goa, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Sikkim, Madhya Pradesh, and Assam. In these states, there are no legal provisions within their respective state acts that allow an approved medical institution to refuse an unclaimed or donated body.[11].
- The establishment of body donation cells within medical colleges is done on a voluntary basis, as newly established colleges do not have the necessary workforce or infrastructure required to implement a body donation program.

Following are the common factors affecting Body donations:

a. Limited Public Awareness

A major challenge is the inadequate public understanding of the purpose, process, and societal value of body donation. Many individuals are unfamiliar with donor registration procedures or assume that only specific types of bodies are accepted. Insufficient community-level educational initiatives further widen this knowledge gap.

b. Cultural and Religious Influences

Cultural and religious beliefs play a big role in how people make decisions about body donation. Misconceptions that body donation may interfere with spiritual transitions or cause disrespect to the deceased contribute to hesitancy among families.

c. Family Consent and Emotional Constraints

Even when individuals pledge to donate their bodies, final consent from family members is essential. Emotional distress at the time of death often leads families to decline donation, despite prior written intent. The lack of pre-death communication within families exacerbates this barrier.

d. Concerns regarding transport and transfer of cadavers and body parts

Currently, there is no specific law in place that governs the transportation and transfer of cadavers and body parts within the state's legal framework. As a result, medical colleges that do not have their own body donation programs are forced to rely on cadavers provided by other institutions that do have such programs or by government facilities that receive unclaimed bodies. The lack of a clear legal regulation in this area creates opportunities for loopholes in the system, which can be exploited by dishonest officials for

personal gain. According to the guidelines set by the IFAA, there should not be any form of financial gain or profit made from the movement of cadavers, body parts, or preserved specimens between various organizations or institutions. It is acceptable to charge for the actual costs that are incurred, such as the expenses related to maintaining a body donation program.[12]

e. Ethical and Transparency Concerns

Families often express concerns regarding how the body will be handled, the duration for which it will be used, and the final rites performed after anatomical study. The absence of clear and open communication from organizations can lead to a loss of trust, which in turn can reduce the desire of individuals to contribute. A detailed study focusing on the expectations of individuals who agree to donate their bodies and their families in the city of Bangalore showed that the family of donors hopes that the body of the deceased will be treated with honour and care. Those who are willing to become body donors, as part of this research, anticipated that medical students would show respect towards the cadaver and reflect this respect through their actions. They also expressed a desire for these students to feel inspired to consider donating their own bodies for educational purposes in the future [13]. For a body donation program to be effective and well-received, it is essential that the body is treated with the same level of respect and dignity of the body should be maintained. The mindset or attitude of medical professionals regarding the idea of donating their own bodies for medical education and research needs to be

changed. A survey conducted in Manipal, India, revealed that just 22% of the physicians surveyed were willing to donate their own bodies for the purpose of medical education. On the other hand, a large majority, 68%, believed that the responsibility of body donation should rest with the public.[14]. Even professionals who are directly involved in teaching anatomy, such as anatomists, are not very willing to donate their own bodies. In two separate studies, only 15.7% of Turkish [15] and 25% of Dutch anatomists expressed willingness to donate their bodies to medical teaching. [16] In a study carried out by Mwachaka in Nairobi, only 22.2% of undergraduate and 19.5% postgraduate medical students were willing to donate their own bodies for dissection purpose. [17] This highlights a significant gap in the willingness of medical students to contribute to the educational process through body donation, which is an important aspect of medical training.

f. Impact of Infectious Disease Concerns

Post-pandemic apprehensions related to infection and contamination continues to influence public attitudes. Families often hesitate to donate if the cause of death involves infectious or unknown conditions, even when institutions have safety protocols in place.

Responsibilities of Institutions in Body Donation Programs

Institutions need to develop comprehensive and detailed policies for body donation programs that clearly show the values they stand for and the goals of the donor program. These policies should clearly outline what each part of the program is responsible for, as well as explain the steps and procedures that must be

followed throughout the program's operation. The policy needs to cover all important aspects related to governance, oversight and reporting structures for the program; it should also include donor registration and consent; policy should explain program resource tracking, and how it can be used; details regarding financial models; roles and responsibilities of staff and security measures should be included in policy, as well as how policy violations will be reported. All policies should be reviewed and updated regularly.[18]

a. Public Awareness and Faculty Training

Institutions have the responsibility to conduct regular awareness campaigns to educate the community. Targeted awareness campaigns that explain body donation in simple, relatable terms to help the public understand its importance and impact can be developed. Training of healthcare professionals, especially doctors and nurses, to discuss body donation with patients as a standard part of care conversations should be done. Institutions should appoint trained coordinators or establish a 24x7 helpline to guide families during the donation process. This proactive approach can help normalize the topic and make patients more comfortable considering body donation.[19]

b. Transparent Documentation and Legal Compliance

Each medical college (especially those with an Anatomy Department) is required to Follow the respective state's Anatomy Act., the institute should maintain a Body Donation Consent Form as per guidelines, along with ethical and procedural approvals (e.g., body registry, death certificate, transportation protocol, etc.). [20]

c. Ethical handling, Safety and Prompt Reception of Donated Bodies

Adequate arrangements for safe transportation, respectful handling, and immediate preservation must be maintained to uphold donor dignity and ensure anatomical viability. In case of a donated body, the remains after the dissection process can be either cremated or buried based on the donor's prior wishes or religious beliefs, provided these have been clearly stated at the time of donation. In the case of unclaimed bodies, as the religion and wish of the deceased may not be known, the mortal remains, after dissection are typically handled in a manner that is convenient and appropriate for the institution involved. From an ethical perspective, ensuring that each body is treated separately and given a proper and respectful way of being disposed of, so that dignity is maintained for the deceased in all cases.

d. Continuous Evaluation and Program Improvement

Institutions should regularly review their body donation policies, feedback systems, and operational challenges. Periodic audits, ethical reviews, and stakeholder meetings help improve transparency, community trust, and overall program effectiveness.

4. CONCLUSION

Despite increasing awareness about the importance of human cadavers in medical education and research, body donation in India continues to face multiple barriers at social, cultural, administrative, and institutional levels. These challenges significantly affect the availability of cadavers for undergraduate and postgraduate training. Awareness of public is the key for

the success of cadaveric donation in India, and Voluntary body donation has been accepted as one of the methods to overcome the shortage of cadavers for dissection in anatomy teaching. Lack of awareness about the concept of voluntary body donation is the biggest obstacle that people face when it comes to participating in body donation programs. The mere possession of knowledge regarding body donation and its importance does not increase participation in the actual process of body donation. There are several other challenges such as strong personal beliefs, the failure to use the donated body in the way the donor intended, and a lack of empathy when handling the body. These factors can all contribute to making body donation a difficult choice for many. However, there are ways to overcome these challenges. Promoting the positive impact of body donors, organizing ongoing awareness campaigns by dedicated non-governmental organizations that work towards body donation, and sharing personal stories and experiences from individuals who have already become body donors can help increase acceptance and encourage more people to consider body donation as a meaningful act.

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