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Organ Transplants

The Watchtower, November 15, 1967, p. 702

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Awake!, June 8, 1968, p. 21

“There are those, such as Christian witnesses of Jehovah, who consider all transplants between humans as cannibalism”

(continued)

The Watchtower, Mar. 15, 1980, p. 31

“Regarding the transplantation of human tissue or bone from one human to another, this is a matter for conscientious decision by each one of Jehovah’s Witnesses. Some Christians might feel that taking into their bodies any tissue or body part from another human is cannibalistic...Other sincere Christians today may feel that the Bible does not definitely rule out medical transplants of human organs. They may reason that in some cases the human material is not expected to become a permanent part of the recipient’s body. Body cells are said to be replaced about every seven years, and this would be true of any human body parts that would be transplanted. It may be argued, too, that organ transplants are different from cannibalism since the ‘donor’ is not killed to supply food... While the Bible specifically forbids consuming blood, there is no Biblical command pointedly forbidding the taking in of other human tissue.”

(done)



● Is there any Scriptural objection to donating one's body for use in medical research or to accepting organs for transplant from such a source?—W. L., U.S.A.

A number of issues are involved in this matter, including the propriety of organ transplants and autopsies. Quite often human emotion is the only factor considered when individuals decide these matters. It would be good, though, for Christians to consider the Scriptural principles that apply, and then make decisions in harmony with these principles so as to be pleasing to Jehovah.—Acts 24:16.

First, it would be well to have in mind that organ transplant operations, such as are now being performed in an attempt to repair the body or extend a life-span, were not the custom thousands of years ago, so we cannot expect to find legislation in the Bible on transplanting human organs. Yet, this does not mean that we have no indication of God's view of such matters.

When Jehovah for the first time allowed humans to eat animal flesh, he explained matters this way to Noah: "A fear of you and a terror of you will continue upon every living creature of the earth and upon every flying creature of the heavens, upon everything that goes moving on the ground, and upon all the fishes of the sea. Into your hand they are now given. Every moving *animal* that is alive may serve as food for you. As in the case of green vegetation, I do give it all to you. Only flesh with its soul—its blood—you must not eat." (Gen. 9:2-4) That allowance was made to Noah, from whom every person now alive descended. Hence, it applies to all of us.

Humans were allowed by God to eat animal flesh and to sustain their human lives by taking the lives of animals, though they were not permitted to eat blood. Did this include eating human flesh, sustaining one's life by means of the body or part of the body of another human, alive or dead? No! That would be cannibalism, a practice abhorrent to all civilized people.

Jehovah clearly made a distinction between the lives of animals and the lives of humans, mankind being created in God's image, with his qualities. (Gen. 1:27) This distinction is evident in His next words. God proceeded to show that man's life is sacred and is not to be taken at will, as may be done with the animals to be used for food. To show disrespect for the sanctity of human life would make one liable to have his own life taken.—Gen. 9:5, 6.

When there is a diseased or defective organ, the usual way health is restored is by taking in nutrients. The body uses the food eaten to repair or heal the organ, gradually replacing the cells. When men of science conclude that this normal process will no longer work and they suggest removing the organ and replacing it directly with an organ from another human, this is simply a shortcut. Those who submit to such operations are thus living off the flesh of another human. That is cannibalistic. However, in allowing man to eat animal flesh Jehovah God did not grant permission for humans to try to perpetuate their lives by cannibalistically taking into their bodies human flesh, whether chewed or in the form of whole organs or body parts taken from others.

It is of interest to note that in its discussion of cannibalism the *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by James Hastings, Volume 3, page 199, has a section designated "Medical cannibalism." It points out that this is associated with the idea of obtaining strength or some medical virtue from the flesh of another human, adding: "The most remarkable example of this practice occurs in China. Among the poor it is not uncommon for a member of the family to cut a piece of flesh from arm or leg, which is cooked and then given to a sick relative.... The whole superstition in China is certainly connected with the idea that the eating of the human body strengthens the eater.... Among savages the practice is found of giving a sick man some blood to drink drawn from the veins of a relative." Some might argue that therapeutic practices involved in modern organ transplant operations are more scientific than such primitive treatment. Nonetheless, it is evident that men practicing medicine have not been beyond using treatments that amount to cannibalism if such have been thought justified.

Modern science has developed many different types of operations that involve human body parts, some common and usually successful and others experimental and often unsuccessful.

omic power. Thus Dr. Forssmann envisions criminals sentenced to death being kept alive until their organs are needed for transplant; then they would be executed by heart-transplant surgeons. Concentration camps would be filled with undesirables who live only until their hearts and kidneys are needed for transplant operations. He is deeply concerned lest "the doctor would finally be degraded to a demon, a Lucifer, a fallen angel." According to Dr. Mitscherlich, that is the use doctors were put to during the Nazi regime. They were employed to get rid of undesirables by injections of various things, such as gasoline or tuberculin; in particular, were physicians on submarines used to get rid of troublemakers in this way.

The Legal Aspects

It is interesting to examine the question of the legal aspects of heart transplants. Doctors are concerned that there is new legislation to protect them from possible lawsuits because of performing heart transplants. In some lands it is unlawful to operate on any person except that person's well-being. This would be even kidney donors, as the taking of a kidney from a donor is not operating on him for his own benefit, but for that of another person.¹²

When, again, conceivably one relative may have given consent but others may not have, and these might file a claim against the surgeon. In many states of the United States the wife as the closest kin would have to give permission.¹³

For example, because the Ochsner Clinic and Ochsner Foundation Hospital had performed an autopsy on a body contrary to the expressed wishes of the deceased without permission of the widow, the Louisiana Circuit Court of Appeals awarded the widow \$1,500 damages.¹⁴

While doctors are concerned about protecting themselves against such lawsuits, their patients are concerned lest they be murdered. Murder is the deliberate taking of the life of another; the fact that death is imminent is beside the point. The law does not distinguish between five minutes, five hours or five years yet to live. As one surgeon expressed it: "For the person who takes a vital organ too soon, society has a word—and that word is murder."¹⁵

Making a strong case for heart transplants as being murder is attorney H. M. Porter. Writing in the legal newspaper, the Los Angeles *Daily Journal*, February 2, 1968, he tells of being assured by a leading cardiologist that no surgeon would undertake the operation unless the person whose heart was to be used was still alive at the beginning of the operation. The heart must come from a living donor. The donor must be killed to take the heart; the taking of the heart must kill him.

Since it is deliberate killing, he argues, it must be termed murder. Murder can be defended on the basis of self-defense, but in the case of the heart transplant, not the donor, but the surgeon is the aggressor. Then, again, the defense for the murder might be consent, but the law does not recognize the right of consent in the case of murder, as in suicide pacts.

The Scriptural Aspect

Not to be overlooked are the religious, the Scriptural issues involved. There are those, such as the Christian witnesses of Jehovah, who consider all transplants between humans as cannibalism; and is not the utilizing of the flesh of another human for one's own life cannibalistic? Nor are they by any means alone in this view. Thus *Newsweek*, December 18, 1968, stated: "An artificial heart that could be mass produced would alleviate the shortage of

QUESTIONS from READERS

● Should congregation action be taken if a baptized Christian accepts a human organ transplant, such as of a cornea or a kidney?

Regarding the transplantation of human tissue or bone from one human to another, this is a matter for conscientious decision by each one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Some Christians might feel that taking into their bodies any tissue or body part from another human is cannibalistic. They might hold that the transplanted human material is intended to become part of the recipient's body to keep him alive and functioning. They might not see it as fundamentally different from consuming flesh through the mouth. Such feelings may arise from considering that God did not make specific provision for man to eat the flesh of his fellowman when he made provision for humans to eat the flesh of animals that had been drained of their life-sustaining blood. They may give consideration also to the way people in Bible times viewed sustaining themselves by taking in human flesh. For example, see the account at 2 Kings 6:24-30; Deuteronomy 28:53-57; Lamentations 2:20 and 4:10. At John 6:48-66, Jesus spoke figuratively of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. On hearing this discussion and not perceiving the spiritual significance of his words, some of his Jewish disciples were shocked and turned from following him. These accounts illustrate how some humans felt about eating human flesh.

Other sincere Christians today may feel that the Bible does not definitely rule out medical transplants of human organs. They may reason that in some cases the human material is not expected to become a permanent part of the recipient's body. Body cells are said to be replaced about every seven years, and this would be true of any human body parts that would be transplanted. It may be argued, too, that organ transplants are different from cannibalism since the "donor" is not killed to supply

food. In some cases persons nearing death actually have willed body parts to be used for transplants. Of course, if a transplant should require taking in another person's blood, undeniably that would be contrary to God's command.—Acts 15:19, 20.

Clearly, personal views and conscientious feelings vary on this issue of transplantation. It is well known that the use of human materials for human consumption varies all the way from minor items, such as hormones and corneas, to major organs, such as kidneys and hearts. While the Bible specifically forbids consuming blood, there is no Biblical command pointedly forbidding the taking in of other human tissue. For this reason, each individual faced with making a decision on this matter should carefully and prayerfully weigh matters and then decide conscientiously what he or she could or could not do before God. It is a matter for personal decision. (Gal. 6:5) The congregation judicial committee would not take disciplinary action if someone accepted an organ transplant.

"WATCHTOWER" STUDIES FOR THE WEEKS

April 20. Choosing the Best Way of Life. Page 16. Songs to Be Used: 60, 112.

April 27: Living Up to Our Choice. Page 21. Songs to Be Used: 55, 8.