

Brain Death and Organ Donation in Islam: *Reconciling Medical Science with Ethical Tradition*

ABSTRACT:

The acceptance of brain death and organ donation within Muslim societies continues to generate significant theological, ethical, and medical discourse. Grounded in both classical Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and contemporary biomedical standards, this manuscript investigates the evolving definitions of death, particularly the legitimacy of brain death as a medically and theologically valid criterion for end-of-life determination. It further examines the permissibility of organ donation—both living and posthumous, through the lens of *maqasid al-shari'ah* (objectives of Islamic law), which prioritize the preservation of life, dignity, and public welfare (*maslaha*). Drawing on a synthesis of authoritative fatwas, global medical consensus, and community-level educational initiatives, the paper presents a narrative argument for promoting ethically sound, religiously sanctioned organ transplantation. It also underscores the importance of culturally sensitive public engagement and interfaith dialogue to dispel misconceptions and enhance trust in medical systems. Through this lens, brain death and organ donation are positioned not as contradictions to Islamic ethics but as deeply aligned with its higher moral objectives.

KEYWORDS: Brain Death; Organ Donation; Transplantation; Islamic Bioethics; Shari'ah and Medicine; End-of-Life Ethics; Maqasid al-Shari'ah; Religious Rulings; Medical Ethics; Transplantation in Islam

INTRODUCTION

Advances in critical care and transplantation have ushered in new ethical challenges, particularly in defining death and authorizing organ donation. For Muslim communities, these developments intersect with deeply held religious values concerning life, death, bodily integrity, and divine trust (*amanah*). As physicians, ethicists, and scholars engage with these issues, a coherent narrative grounded in both scientific rigor and Islamic jurisprudence is essential.

Reflecting this commitment, Dow University of Health Sciences (DUHS) is organizing a high-level seminar titled “Brain Death and Organ Donation in Islam: Religious and Ethical Aspects” on April 10, 2025, under the banner of its Respect for Human Body Awareness Program (Figure 1)ⁱ. The event features an exceptional panel of Islamic scholars, including Allama Muhammad Khan Sherani, Allama Muhammad Raghīb Hussain Naeemi, and Dr. Mufti Mazhar Fareed Shah, and medical experts such as Prof. Dr. Asim Ahmad and Dr. Shahzad

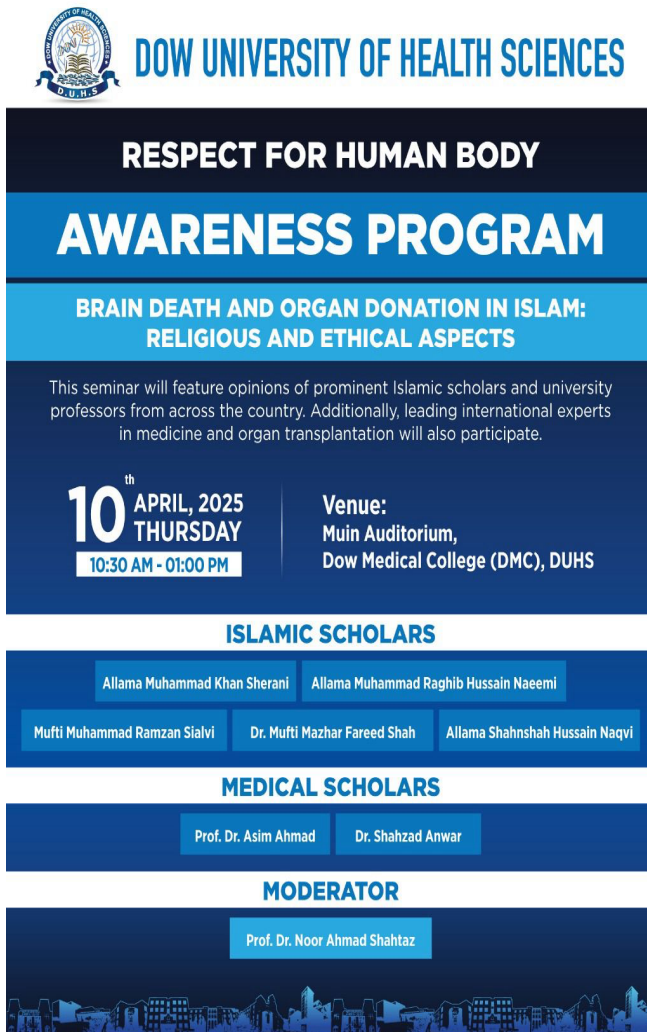
Anwar. The program, moderated by Prof. Dr. Noor Ahmad Shahtaz, exemplifies the collaborative and interdisciplinary discourse urgently needed in Muslim-majority societies to guide ethically and theologically grounded medical decision-making.

Brain Death: Scientific and Ethical Clarity

Medically, brain death refers to the irreversible cessation of all brain activity, including in the brainstem, confirmed through standardized neurological assessment. It is distinct from states like coma or vegetative function, as brain death represents total and irreversible loss of integrative bodily functions (Wijdicks, 2002).

From an Islamic legal standpoint, this definition has been scrutinized but increasingly accepted. The Islamic Fiqh Academy of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) issued a resolution in 1986 declaring brain death an acceptable definition of death, provided that the diagnosis is certain and based on rigorous medical criteria (Islamic Fiqh Academy, Resolution No. 17). Similarly, the

Figure 1: Promotional Flyer for the “Respect for Human Body” Awareness Program on Brain Death and Organ Donation in Islam, Held at Dow University of Health Sciences (April 10, 2025)



Council of Senior Ulema in Saudi Arabia and Al-Azhar’s Fatwa Committee have issued parallel rulings supporting this definition.

This acceptance hinges on the broader Islamic principle of *maqasid al-shariah*, the objectives of Shari’ah, which include the preservation of life, religion, intellect, lineage, and property. Once life has ceased in its essential biological and spiritual

form, prolonging somatic support may constitute an unjustified medical intervention (Ghaly, 2012).

Organ Donation as an Ethical Imperative

Islamic teachings emphasize compassion, altruism, and communal responsibility. The Qur’an declares: “*And whoever saves a life, it is as if he has saved all of humanity*” (Qur’an 5:32). This verse has served as a foundational ethical principle cited by numerous jurists to justify organ donation when it serves to save or greatly improve lives (Sachedina, 2009).

In 2000, the International Islamic Fiqh Academy affirmed the permissibility of organ donation from living and deceased donors, conditional on informed consent, non-commercialization, and medical appropriateness. Additionally, Pakistan’s Federal Shariat Court and various fatwa councils in Egypt, Iran, and Malaysia have issued guidelines in favor of donation under strict ethical oversight (Rady & Verheijde, 2009).

While the inviolability of the human body after death is a concern, scholars have noted that exceptions for autopsy and burial delay are already acknowledged in Shari’ah under necessity. Organ donation can similarly be considered an act of *maslaha* (public interest) when it leads to significant benefit without causing harm to others.

Community Concerns and Misconceptions

Despite religious rulings, reluctance remains in many Muslim communities. Misconceptions include beliefs that brain death is not true death or that organ donation interferes with the resurrection of the body on the Day of Judgment. Such concerns, though rooted in reverence, often arise from a lack of exposure to scholarly opinion and modern bioethics.

Religious leaders, when engaged with up-to-date medical information, have proven to be powerful advocates for ethical donation practices. Educational initiatives, such as the upcoming seminar hosted by DUHS, demonstrate the growing commitment of

academic and religious institutions to bridge the gap between faith and science in a culturally sensitive way.

Recommendations for Integration

1. **Public Engagement:** Trusted Islamic scholars and healthcare professionals should collaborate to lead community forums and Friday sermons that explain brain death and organ donation within the framework of Islamic jurisprudence.
2. **Medical Standards and Policy:** National guidelines should ensure that the diagnosis of brain death follows internationally accepted protocols, confirmed by independent experts to avoid conflicts of interest.
3. **Ethical Oversight:** All organ donations must occur under ethically governed systems ensuring voluntariness, transparency, and respect for religious values.
4. **Scholarly Dialogue:** Ongoing ijihad (independent reasoning) by jurists in light of evolving medical science should be supported to keep religious interpretations relevant and compassionate.

CONCLUSION

Islam is a religion that honors both life and dignity. It encourages the alleviation of suffering and promotes acts of mercy. When understood correctly, the determination of brain death and the donation of organs are not only compatible with Islamic ethics, but they also exemplify its highest ideals.

Initiatives such as the April 2025 Awareness Program at Dow University of Health Sciences offer a timely and necessary platform to elevate this

discourse. By fostering respectful, multidisciplinary dialogue, Muslim societies can move toward policies and practices that are scientifically sound, ethically just, and spiritually grounded.

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