

Organ donation and religious beliefs



A guide to organ donation
and Sikh beliefs

Organ donation

Organ donation

Organ donation is the gift of an organ to help someone who needs a transplant. Thousands of people's lives across the UK are saved or improved each year by organ transplants. But every day across the UK someone dies waiting for an organ transplant.

Organs that can be donated by people who have died include the heart, lungs, kidneys, liver, pancreas and small bowel. Tissue such as skin, bone, heart valves and corneas can also be used to help others. Living donation of a single kidney or part of a liver is also possible.

Why is it important to think about donating organs?

With medical advances it is now possible to use transplanted organs and tissues to enhance the life chances of those suffering from a range of terminal conditions such as kidney, liver and heart failure. More people than before now suffer from these conditions and some ethnic

groups seem to be more affected than others.

The person in need of an organ today may be a stranger, but tomorrow that person could be someone you know and love. So please take the time to decide whether you want to be an organ donor, record that decision on the NHS Organ Donor Register, then tell your family.

Family involvement

Families play an important role in organ donation in all areas of the UK, regardless of whether an opt in or opt out system is in place.

If you die in circumstances where you could be an organ donor, a specialist organ donation nurse would check the NHS Organ Donor Register to see if you had registered your decision, and speak to your next of kin to discuss whether you wanted to be a donor. The voice of your family is critical to what happens. So, whatever your decision, it's important they know what you want. This will make it easier for them to honour your decision.

When can organ donation take place?

Doctors and other healthcare staff are committed to doing everything possible to save a patient's life. Organ donation is only considered once all attempts to save life have failed and after death has been confirmed by doctors who are entirely independent of the transplant team.

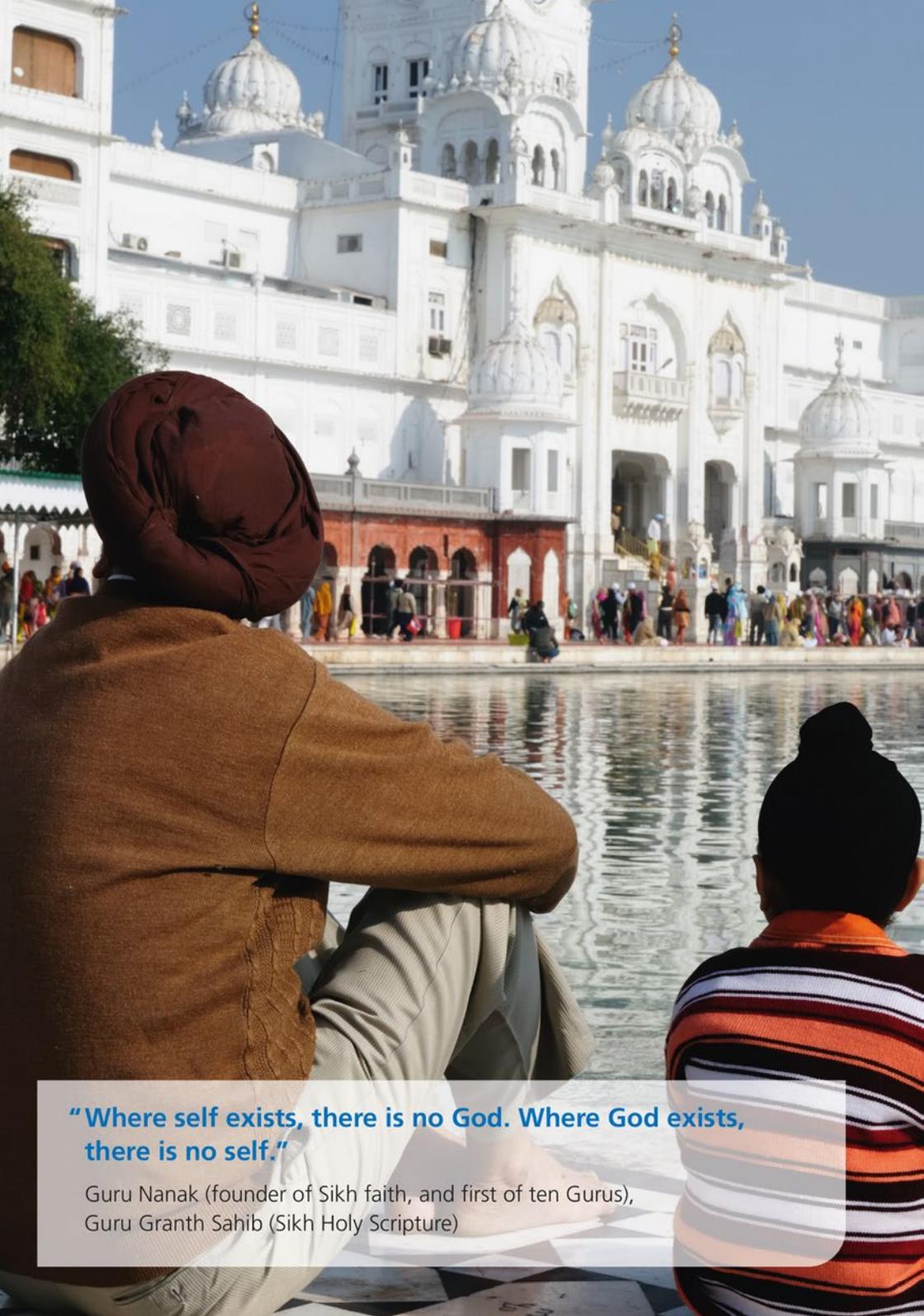
Most donated organs in the UK come from people who die from a severe brain injury, and who are on a ventilator in an intensive care unit. The brain injury will have damaged the vital centres in the brain stem which are essential for life. Doctors call this confirmation of death using neurological criteria, also known as 'brain stem death'. This is not the same as being in a coma or 'vegetative state'. Tests are carried out by two senior doctors, who are independent of the transplant team, on two different occasions, following strict national guidance.

When death is confirmed using neurological criteria, the patient will still be on a ventilator (a machine that pushes air into the lungs and supports the circulation of blood around the body). This prevents the organs from losing the oxygen-rich blood supply, which is necessary for a healthier transplant outcome.

Organs can also be donated from people, who, with their family's agreement, are having life-sustaining intensive care treatment withdrawn. If the heart stops and circulation ceases soon after, death will be confirmed and donation can occur. This is known as 'donation after circulatory death'.

Care and respect

The removal of organs and tissues is carried out with the greatest care and respect. The family can see the body afterwards and staff can contact a chaplain or local religious leader if the family wishes.



“Where self exists, there is no God. Where God exists, there is no self.”

Guru Nanak (founder of Sikh faith, and first of ten Gurus),
Guru Granth Sahib (Sikh Holy Scripture)

Sikhism and organ donation

The Sikh philosophy and teachings place great emphasis on the importance of giving and putting others before oneself:

“Where self exists, there is no God. Where God exists, there is no self.”

Guru Nanak (founder of Sikh faith, and first of ten Gurus), Guru Granth Sahib (Sikh Holy Scripture)

Sikh Gurus devoted their lives for the benefit of humanity and some even sacrificed their lives looking after the welfare of others. The Guru Granth Sahib says:

“Within this world take the opportunity for selfless service to others; then in divine abode we get the chance to be,” says Nanak. “The Eternal will embrace you.”

Seva or selfless service is at the core of being a Sikh: to give without seeking reward or recognition and know that all seva is known to and appreciated by the Eternal. Seva can also be donation of one’s organ to another. There are no taboos attached to organ donation in Sikhi nor is there a requirement that a body should have all its organs intact at or after death. According to Sikhi the soul migrates in a perpetual cycle of rebirth but the physical body is only a vassal in its long journey, left behind each time and dissolved into the elements, as the Guru Granth Sahib says in Asaa Mahala 5:

“That time, which the mortal does not wish for, eventually comes. Without the Eternal’s order the understanding of mortality is never understood. The body is consumed by water, fire and earth. But the soul is neither young nor old, O human, thus it is the soul and not the body which continues its journey.”

“The Sikh religion teaches that life continues after death in the soul, and not the physical body. The last act of giving and helping others through organ donation is both consistent with and in the spirit of Sikh teachings.”

*Lord Singh of Wimbledon CBE,
Director of the Network of Sikh
Organisations, UK (endorsed by Sikh
Authorities in Amritsar, Punjab)*

The Sikh faith stresses the importance of performing noble deeds. There are many examples of selfless giving and sacrifice in Sikh teachings by the ten Gurus and other Sikh:

“Guru Har Krishen, our eighth Guru, gave his life helping sufferers during a smallpox epidemic. It is entirely consistent with his spirit of service that we consider donating organs after death to give life and hope to others... In my family we all carry donor cards and would encourage all Sikhs to do so.”

*Lord Singh of Wimbledon
CBE, Director, Network of Sikh
Organisations, UK*

Donating one's organ to another so that the person may live is one of the greatest gifts and ultimate seva to human kind and hence Satguru says:

“Through selfless service, eternal peace is obtained. The Gurumukhi is absorbed in intuitive peace.”

Guru Granth Sahib

“Donation without reward is one of the characteristics of a Guru's Sikhs. The life of Gurumukhi is useful because by their natural temperament they are donors. And why not donate an organ so another can live?”

*Dr Jasdev Rai, British Sikh Consultative
Forum (BSCF)*

The Guru Granth further says:

“Through virtuous deeds, the dead establish a bond with the living.”

This leaflet had been developed with the input of the Network of Sikh Organisations and contributions from British Sikh Consultative Forum.

More information on Sikhism is available from www.nsouk.co.uk and www.bscf.org

Making your choice

How do I become a donor?

If you want to donate some or all of your organs or tissue after your death, the best way to ensure your family know what you want and honour your decision is to register as a donor on the NHS Organ Donor Register and to tell your family what you have decided. You can also record on the register whether your faith/belief is important and should be considered as part of the donation discussion.

What if I don't want to donate?

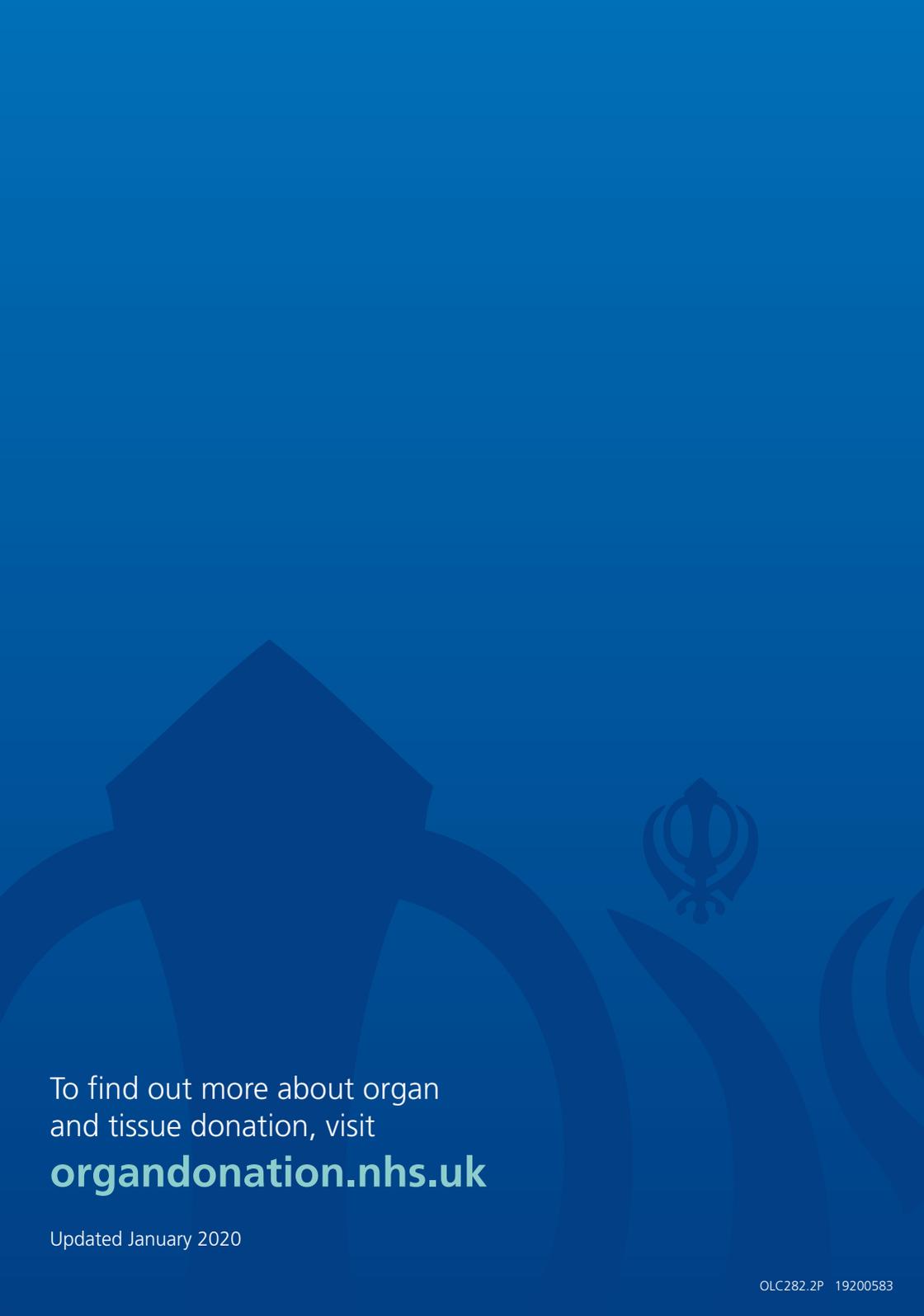
If you don't want to donate, it is important to register this decision on the NHS Organ Donor Register and to tell your family.

Don't 'opt out' of donation if you are happy to donate some organs or tissue but not others. Instead, register as an organ donor and select the organs or tissue you would like to donate.

You can find out more about organ and tissue donation or register your decision, whatever it is, online at **organdonation.nhs.uk** or by calling 0300 123 23 23.

What if I want to nominate someone to make the donation decision?

There is a form available to download from organdonation.nhs.uk which enables you to nominate someone else to make the donation decision for you. You will need to complete the form and send it back. Please note that whether or not you can legally nominate a representative to make the decision for you depends on where you live in the UK.



To find out more about organ
and tissue donation, visit
organdonation.nhs.uk

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