

Whole-body donation through the lens of Shona culture and Christian religion in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Voluntary donation is the ethically acceptable method for whole-body acquisition for anatomy education worldwide. In Africa, educational institutions struggle with this since many people remain unwilling to donate their bodies due to the strong influence of cultural and religious beliefs in decision-making. As part of wider efforts to improve the ethical sourcing of bodies in Zimbabwean medical schools, which are heavily reliant on unclaimed bodies, this study sought to determine the influences traditional and religious beliefs have on such decisions. We ascertained traditional and religious leaders' knowledge of whole-body donation, explored cultural and religious views toward death, dying and whole-body donation as well as their underlying reasons. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with traditional chiefs and Christian leaders who are considered the custodians of Zimbabwean traditional cultural and Christian values, respectively. Thematic analysis of traditional chiefs' interviews revealed that none of the chiefs had accurate knowledge regarding whole-body donation or the processes involved. Due to set traditional practices around death, most traditional chiefs viewed the practice as foreign with possible negative repercussions to the dissectors. Most of the Christian leaders had knowledge of whole-body donation. Their views were split between support for whole-body donation and regard as a religious and cultural misfit. Overall, both traditional chiefs and Christian leaders understood the importance of whole-body donation and requested further societal sensitization and education if the practice is to become socially acceptable.

Keywords

body donation, religion, traditional culture, Zimbabwe