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Abstract, Plenary Talk

“Beyond the Gift: Reflections on Kidney Donation in Pakistan”

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Among medical specialties, organ transplantation remains unique in its reliance on the willingness of individuals to undergo risks of a surgical procedure that provides no direct benefit to them and on others to allow the use of their organs following death to help save the life of strangers. The most prominent metaphor that has come to serve as a clarion call for organ donation is the “gift of life.”<sup>1</sup> Donating an organ is seen to be based on altruism, a supererogatory act that goes beyond duty and claim, and one that is “praiseworthy but optional even if living donors view their acts as obligatory.”<sup>2</sup> Physicians are obligated to ensure that family members make decisions to donate as autonomous agents free of social, familial, or other pressures, and to assess that the motive is love and the rewarding nature of the donation itself.

This dominant paradigm, with its secular language and its metaphors and motives, is a social construct in which autonomy and rights of individuals are considered primary values and emotional bonds between a donor and a recipient given center stage. This view forms the basis for most international ethical and medical discourse and publications related to organ transplantation. However the experiential realities of human lives - and the diversity of ways in which human make sense of and deal with life threatening illnesses, human suffering and death - are shaped by the shared history, indigenous culture, and belief and value systems of a particular society. Organ donation and transplantation are now among the most common procedures undertaken around the world and yet relatively little is known about the values and motives of donors from non-Western oriented societies when they donate or refuse to donate an organ to kin.

My own research on kidney donors in Pakistan reveals that those who donate do so for a combination of reasons in which the metaphor of a “gift” and a language of rights do not appear. While love for the family member features as an important reason, many comprehend the act of donation as a religious duty (*farz*) towards kin, one that pleases God and will be rewarded by Him (*sawab*) in the hereafter. In the case of large, interdependent families, decisions about who will or will not donate can be based on pragmatic considerations for the welfare of the family unit leading at times to empowerment of the donor. My presentation will explore some of these aspects of kidney donation in Pakistan and how they raise their own set of ethical issues, and highlight the complexity and diversity of ethical reality.

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<sup>1</sup> Renee C. Fox, Judith P. Swazey, *Spare Parts: Organ Replacement in American Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992; Hans Jonas, “Philosophical Reflections on Experimenting with Human Subjects,” in *Experimentation with Human Subjects*. New York: George Braziller, 1970

<sup>2</sup> Tom L. Beauchamp, James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001