



Is an autopsy permitted in Hinduism (Sanatan Dharma)?



We at Dipika humbly prostrate and seek the divine blessings of Mother Saraswati in compiling this much-anticipated article. This subject matter has long been considered sensitive and controversial by both the religious and scientific communities. Therefore, we at Dipika will attempt to analyze different perspectives to a certain degree, and will aim to present a fairly well-balanced discussion. We hope that this article will enlighten the public as opposed to creating further confusion; however, due to its sensitive nature, this content may indeed provoke further debate.

Before we proceed with the current subject matter, we strongly urge you to read the article that Dipika released a few years back named “Organ Donation – From a Hindu Perspective”.

<https://dipika.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Organ-Donation-%e2%80%93-from-a-Hindu-Perspective.pdf>

In a nutshell, the article above quotes various Vedic scriptures which suggest that there is no Shastric evidence that prohibits Hindus (Sanatanists) from donating their organs and tissues. Many references support the concept of organ donation in Vedic (Hindu) scriptures. It is important to keep this in mind as we proceed with the current discussion.

Perception of life and death according to Sanatan Dharma (Hinduism): A central belief of the Hindu religion is transmigration of the soul. The body is perceived as a mortal shell used by the eternal soul. After death, the spirit leaves the body and is reborn in some other form.

Management of a deceased in Hinduism: The funeral or Antyesti (“last Rites”) is the last Samskara (rite of passage) in the Hindu life cycle. It is traditionally arranged as soon as possible, usually within 24 hours of death, though exceptions may be made given the circumstances of the death or the needs of the family. The details of Hindu funeral rites vary considerably depending on the school of thought, community, caste, gender and age of the dead -- with that in mind, only a very generalized description can be presented here.

Why perform an Autopsy? The primary reason for an autopsy is to determine the cause of a death. However, the results can be used for multiple purposes including:

- * to assess the physicians' quality of care.
- * for organ procurement.
- * in other teachings.
- * for research.
- * for other reasons, including family or physician curiosity and medico-legal uses.

Autopsy results cover more than just an individual's last medical report.

Medical Practice and Science

- * Assistance in the discovery or elucidation of new diseases.
- * Explanation of unknown or unanticipated medical complications.
- * Assistance in the development or quality assurance of new technology, procedures, and therapy.
- * Education of medical professionals.

The Judicial System

- * Classification and explanation of sudden, unexpected, and/or unnatural deaths.

Public Welfare

- * Identification of infectious and contagious diseases.
- * Identification and monitoring of occupational and environmental health hazards.
- * Assurance of quality control and assessment of risk in hospital practices.
- * Provision of organs and tissues for medical and scientific purposes.
- * Provision of materials and hypotheses for research.
- * Improvement of accuracy and therefore, usefulness of vital statistics.

The Deceased Person's Family

- * Assistance in grief process.
- * Discovery of contagious diseases within the family.
- * Provision of information for genetic counseling and identification of family health risks.

The Hindu attitude towards Autopsies and Organ donation: Hindus generally accept autopsies with sufficient persuasion, though they are typically not preferred by many. In general, most people prefer an early funeral. If an autopsy is being performed, preparation of the body can only begin after the autopsy has been completed. Therefore, the likelihood of a procedural delay may prove to be a deterrent in persuading people to give their consent for an autopsy. There are no religious objections to organ donation. The body, especially the face of the deceased, is typically open for viewing after death. Therefore, cosmetic considerations tend to be weighed carefully before attempting to retrieve any organ, particularly the eyes. After the autopsy is completed, the body is typically bathed, wrapped in a plain white sheet and handed over to the relatives.

Covid and Autopsy: Autopsies have been widely debated in relation to COVID-19 in various parts of the world. Many governments advise against conducting autopsies on confirmed COVID-19 deaths, due mainly to the risk of virus transmission from the body. For suspected cases, the decision-making power remains with the country's states/provinces and hospitals, depending on the availability of testing kits.

For further information, please read the following article that Dipika released in early 2021:

<https://dipika.org.za/is-passing-away-with-the-covid-19-virus-considered-an-unnatural-death-how-to-perform-a-covid-funeral-and-other-covid-related-information/>

Varying traditions, beliefs, and practices surrounding death are common in all cultures and religions, and have resulted in disagreements regarding anatomic dissections and post-mortem examinations. Such views have even been thought to hinder scientific and medical discoveries in past years. People from more westernized or diverse environments, tend to have less cohesive connections with religion, traditions and beliefs, and therefore have a greater acceptance of autopsies. In contrast, non-westernized cultural groups generally have more unified traditions and practices surrounding death, and therefore, more frequently express religious objections to autopsies.

Although cultural or religious beliefs are often cited as a primary reason for opposition to autopsies, most religions and cultures do indeed find autopsies acceptable on the basis of either the individual's beliefs, or under what are deemed to be 'special circumstances'. Certain religions (eg, Islam, Judaism), have objections to autopsies on the grounds that body tampering violates the sanctity of the human body. However, it's worth noting that the religious doctrines of these religions do not strictly forbid it.

Views regarding autopsies differ not only among different religions, but also among people within the same faith.

Knowing that the body of a loved one may undergo an autopsy can be emotionally difficult, regardless of one's background. This becomes an even more emotionally charged topic when the procedure offends certain deeply and strongly-held beliefs, such as religious tenets.

Sushruta Samhita and its views on Autopsies

Vedic scientific and Vedic medical treatises (Caraka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita), form an important part of the Vedas. Sage Caraka (pronounced as Charaka) deals with internal medicine while Sage Sushruta includes features of organ and limb transplants.

The Sushruta Samhita (literally "Sushruta's Compendium") is an ancient Sanskrit text on medicine and surgery, and is one of the most important treatises on this subject to survive from the ancient world. The Compendium of Sushruta is one of the foundational texts of Ayurveda (Indian traditional medicine), alongside the Caraka-Samhita, the Bhela-Samhita, and the medical portions of the Bower Manuscript. It is one of two foundational Hindu texts about the medical profession that have survived from ancient India.

The Sushruta Samhita is of great historical importance because it includes historically unique chapters describing surgical training, instruments and procedures which are still followed by modern science of surgery.

Partial resolution of these uncertainties has come from the comparison of the Sushruta Samhita text with several Vedic hymns particularly the Atharva-veda, the hymn on the creation of humans in its 10th book, and the chapters of Atreya Samhita (which describe the human skeleton).

The Sushruta Samhita was composed after Caraka Samhita, and except for certain topics and their emphasis, both of these discuss many similar subjects such as General Principles, Pathology, Diagnosis, Anatomy, Sensorial Prognosis, Therapeutics, Pharmaceutics and Toxicology.

Sushruta Samhita: Book 2 discusses pathology in detail. Pathology is a branch of medical science primarily concerning the cause, origin and nature of disease. It involves the examination of tissues, organs, bodily fluids and autopsies in order to study and diagnose a disease.

Anatomy and empirical studies: The different parts or members of the body as mentioned before, including the skin, cannot be correctly described by one who is not well versed in anatomy. To quote "anyone, who wishes to acquire a thorough knowledge of anatomy, must prepare a dead body and carefully observe and examine all its parts" – *Sushruta Samhita, Book 3, Chapter V*

Considering the information provided above, one can only deduce that in order to exam a body in detail, an autopsy would have been required to be performed.

The Sushruta Samhita states, that "the professors of Ayurveda speak of three hundred and sixty bones". The text then lists the total of 300 as follows: 120 in the extremities (eg. hands, legs), 117 in the pelvic area, sides, back, abdomen and breast, and 63 in the neck and upwards. The text then explains how these subtotals were empirically verified.

The Sushruta Samhita is best known for its approach and discussions about surgery. It was one of the first texts in human history to suggest that a student of surgery learn about the human body and its organs by dissecting a dead body. The text states that a student should practice on objects resembling the diseased body part.

Incision studies, for example, are recommended on Pushpaphala (squash, Cucurbita maxima), Alavu (bottle gourd, Lagenaria vulgaris), Trapusha (cucumber, Cucumis pubescens), leather bags filled with fluids and bladders of dead animals.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF SUSHRUTA TO ANATOMY

by Dr Deepa Bhat, Assistant Professor, Department of Anatomy, JSS Medical College, JSS University, Karnataka. India and K Pushpalatha

Sage Sushruta, a practitioner of ancient Indian Medicine, made very significant contributions to various branches of medicine. He is famous as a disciple of Dhanwantari, who is known as the Lord Deity of Ayurveda, the Indian system of

medicine. He hailed from Kashi, in Northern India, & is glorified as the Father of Indian Surgery. He practiced and taught medicine around 600BC. He performed surgeries in an era where diagnostic facilities were not available, yet he still obtained successful outcomes from most of his procedures. The exhaustive knowledge of basic sciences that he possessed, would have undoubtedly made him a very versatile surgeon.

The most credible compilation of his achievements and teachings are available in the treatise called "Sushruta Samhita". This book is a comprehensive compendium with 184 chapters, with descriptions of 1120 illnesses, 700 medicinal plants, 64 preparations from mineral sources and 57 preparations based on animal sources.

Contributions of Sushruta to Anatomy. Embalming, Preservation and Dissection.

The study of anatomy is covered in the Sarirasthana of the Susruta Samhita in its ten chapters. Sage Sushruta was a strong upholder of human dissection, as evident from his texts. His texts include a systematic method for the dissection of the human cadaver. He gave considerable thought to anatomical structure and function. His writings do not give any indication that they were acquired from animal dissection. They were mastered from extensive human dissection and were perfected despite religious interferences. He goes on to suggest that aspiring surgeons should first be an anatomist for skillful and successful practice. Sage Sushruta was the first person to initiate the preservation of the deceased and subsequent cadaver dissection in a scientific manner. He carefully explained the methods for preserving the dead body and the ensuing preparations, before the dissection was to begin. There is adequate evidence that in ancient India, anatomical study of the human body was already being performed. To once again quote the appropriate translation, "Anyone, who wishes to acquire a thorough knowledge of anatomy, must prepare a dead body and carefully observe and examine all its parts". The method of study was to submerge the body in water and allow it to decompose: an examination of the decomposing body was then carried out at specific intervals to study structures, layer by layer, as they were exposed following decomposition.

Skeletal Anatomy

Sage Sushruta deserves the credit for classifying skeletal injuries into groups with respect to their anatomical variation and prognostic values; he also elaborated on proper management of these injuries. What was remarkable was that he accomplished this even before the advent of Roentgen X rays. He classified bones based on dissections, as either

flat, small cubical, cartilages, thin curved and long. Classification to this degree of accuracy, showed that he was a keen observer and could apply his anatomical proficiency into practice. He had a thorough knowledge of the different types of fractures, dislocations, sprains and their healing processes, and this helped him establish proper management and rehabilitation tools. He also designed various devices that are now used in the treatment of bone injuries.

From his extensive works, it is evident that there is no area of medicine not explored by Sage Sushruta, and one can easily recognize why he has been glorified in this field.

Conclusion: From my perspective, autopsies, embalming and organ donation are all generally acceptable in Hinduism, although no specific directives have been provided for performing these autopsies.



THE (South African) LAW AND AUTOPSY

When a person dies due to unnatural causes, it is required by South African Law that a post mortem examination be performed on the deceased, so as to determine the cause of death. The permission of the family is not needed to perform the autopsy, and the next of kin may not deny this process.

REGULATIONS REGARDING THE RENDERING OF FORENSIC PATHOLOGY SERVICE in terms of section 90(1)(i) of the South African National Health Act, 2003 (Act No. 61 of 2003). Kindly click on this link for the document in its entirety.

https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/27464f0.pdf

A section of the document above is provided below...

“In these Regulations, unless the context indicates otherwise, a word or expression to which a meaning has been assigned in the Act, has the same meaning, and - “autopsy” means a post mortem dissection of a corpse; “authorized person” means a forensic pathologist, forensic medical officer or medical practitioner qualified to perform post mortem examinations and/or autopsies on human bodies or the remains thereof and appointed in terms of regulation 22(b) of these regulations; “body” means a dead human body or the remains thereof and “corpse” has a corresponding meaning; “death due to unnatural causes” include the following:- (a) any death due to the application of force, direct or indirect, and its (b) any death due to the effects of any chemical or toxic substance, or drug, (c) any death where another person, by negligent act or omission can

be (d) any death occurring while the deceased was under the influence of a (e) where the death is sudden and unexpected or unexplained.”

DISCLAIMER 1:- This article is intended for information and educational purposes only and does not constitute advice. Kindly ensure that you comply with the instructions of the necessary authorities particularly in instances of unnatural or violent death. This article provides spiritual advice and it is not intended to provide legal advice.

DISCLAIMER 2:- Do note that Dipika is not affiliated to any Hindu group or organization. We at Dipika choose to remain an independent repository of spiritual advice. We appreciate that there are variances between organisations and humbly request that if our views differ from yours that you respect our decision not to conform to the prescripts of your particular organisation. We remain committed to spiritual advice which is based on scripture.

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this article. We pray that this article will assist you in some way and we also pray that it helps you to appreciate the beauty and remarkable foresight of our ancient Hindu culture. We wish to educate all readers and demystify the path of Hinduism (Sanatan Dharma). Please feel free to share these articles with friends and family who do not have direct access to our website or articles. If you use the articles in any form including blogs and/or as part of other articles kindly credit our website as a source. We hope that the articles serve as a reference to you and your family when you need clarification of certain topics. Jai Shree Radha-Krishna

Please do visit our Website to receive more
free information about our beautiful culture

www.dipika.org.za

Compiled for the upliftment of Sanatan Dharma

Narottam das and Arjun Nandlal

T.C.

Dipika's disclaimers are provided by Advocate Fiona Naidu.

E-mail info@dipika.org.za



#TeamDipika

