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## Original Article

# Posthumous organ donation beliefs of college students: A qualitative study



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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To explore the perspectives and beliefs of college students toward posthumous organ donation, and the factors influencing their beliefs.

**Methods:** This was a descriptive phenomenology study conducted with semi-structured in-depth interviews. Nine college students attending three universities in Beijing who agreed to participate in this study were interviewed. Data were analyzed following the guideline suggested by Colaizzi (1978). Briefly, statements identified as noteworthy were coded and organized. A description was then written to formalize their meaning and returned to the participants for validation of the description.

**Results:** In general, the participants exhibited positive attitudes toward posthumous organ donation. However, not all subjects indicated that they would become an organ donor. Based on the provided responses, four main themes emerged: (1) knowledge about organ donation, participants reported a general lack of education or understanding of organ transplantation and donation; (2) core beliefs on organ donation, despite believing it is valuable public service, participants were unwilling to go against the cultural beliefs held by parents and elders; (3) factors influencing beliefs on organ donation, including cultural and peer opinion, posthumous care of the body, legal registration, and publicity; (4) institutional and policy context, lack of guarantee for proper use of organs after donation was a concern.

**Conclusion:** Despite positive attitudes towards posthumous organ donation, college students are hesitant to become donors because of lack of knowledge/publicity; cultural disdain; and lack of governmental assurance.

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## 1. Introduction

Organ transplantation is an effective method for treating organ failure [1]. However, the number of organ donors is insufficient to accommodate the current need [2]. For example, in China alone, ~300,000 patients each year with end-stage liver disease require a life-saving organ transplant [3]. The limited number of available donors is exacerbated by the increased need due to medical advancements [4]. Thus, there is a need for a transparent, fair and ethical organ donation system [5].

In China, organ donation conflicts with traditional culture and ethics [6]. Therefore, it is critical to educate the Chinese population on the importance of organ donation and to relax the long-held beliefs that pose an obstacle. To gain a better understanding of the current attitudes towards organ donation, an in-depth evaluation of the beliefs of college students in China was undertaken. The actions and beliefs of this population will undoubtedly affect the future of the entire society [6–8]. To date, only a few qualitative studies have been published on college students' beliefs of organ donation, which can be expressed in a narrative format and for which the interaction of factors can be determined by narrative analysis. The aim of the current study was to explore students' beliefs regarding posthumous organ donation in order to provide a basis for improving their awareness and to increase their willingness to donate organs.

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## 2. Material and methods

### 2.1. Participant selection

This was a descriptive phenomenology study that utilized purposive sampling of fourth-year bachelor's degree students from three universities in Beijing. Participants were recruited from ads posted on publicity boards at the universities requesting they contact a researcher if interested. Students included in the study were selected from different disciplines to provide a more diverse sample. In total, nine students were interviewed, including four liberal arts students, three science students, and two medical students. Data saturation was reached after the nine interviews. All the participants who volunteered to participate were provided informed consent.

### 2.2. Data collection

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted during the academic year of 2012–2013. All the interviews were conducted in the lobbies of the buildings where classes were held. Key questions in the interview guideline were: (1) Have you heard of organ donation? (2) How do you feel when someone donates his/her organs? (3) Have you thought about donating your organs after death? (4) What is the purpose of organ donation? Each interview lasted for 40–60 min and was tape-recorded with the consent of the participants. Data was recorded using pseudonyms to ensure anonymity, and the taped recordings were destroyed after the de-identified transcripts were created.

### 2.3. Data analysis

Transcriptions of the narratives obtained from the interviews were analyzed using the data analysis method described by Colaizzi [9]. First, transcripts were reviewed line by line by two researchers to gain a sense of the participants. Next, the researchers extracted statements with significance to the research question. Then, the researchers began to articulate what the statements mean and created themes from the meanings. Finally, the researchers integrated the results into a comprehensive description and returned to the participants for validation of the description. No new data were revealed from the participants. The results were compared and discussed between the two researchers throughout the analysis to reach agreement.

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## 3. Results

In total, nine participants were interviewed, including five women and four men, aged 21–22 years. All but two of the participants originated from urban areas, four of which did not have any siblings. The two rural students had siblings. Overall, the participants expressed their support for organ donation and were willing to donate organs after death, yet many were not sure whether they wanted to register as organ donors at present. Four themes emerged from the interview narratives: (1) knowledge about organ donation; (2) core beliefs on organ donation; (3) factors influencing beliefs on organ donation; and (4) institutional and policy context. In general, the participants lacked knowledge about organ donation, yet held positive attitudes and core beliefs. They were concerned about family attitudes, Chinese traditional culture and social norms, which affected their decision to be organ donors.

### 3.1. Themes 1 and 2: knowledge and core beliefs about organ donation

Most participants did not know about the organ donation and registration authority. Participants reported that they were not given comprehensive or systematic education regarding organ donation, but rather obtained their information from the media.

Participants reported beliefs that both promoted and hindered organ donation. On the one hand, organ donation was seen as a valuable way to assist others as a kind of public service that had no impact on the donor after death. However, many of the participants also perceived organ donation as complex and involved decision. Moreover, it was considered as something that did not pertain to them at present, and not an issue they needed to consider at this point in their life. Noteworthy statements are presented in [Table 1](#).

### 3.2. Theme 3: factors influencing beliefs on organ donation

Despite the apparent willingness of participants to donate organs after death, four main factors emerged that likely influenced their ultimate decisions. First, cultural and peer values tended to hinder the likelihood that the participants

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