

Religious Perspectives on Postmortem Tumor Tissue Donation: A Report from Gift from a Child

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Key points:

- Major U.S. faith traditions broadly support postmortem tumor donation when it promotes healing and medical progress.
- Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Islamic perspectives affirm donation under informed consent and respect for bodily dignity.
- Clear communication of religious positions can reduce perceived barriers and increase participation in cancer research.

Importance of Study: Religious objections are often perceived as barriers to postmortem tumor tissue donation, yet this study demonstrates broad theological and ethical support across major U.S. faith traditions—including Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, and Islam—when donation serves the greater good of alleviating suffering and advancing medical knowledge. Unlike prior literature, which rarely synthesizes doctrinal positions, this work provides clear, authoritative guidance for clinicians and families navigating these sensitive decisions. By integrating religious literacy into end-of-life discussions, healthcare teams can dispel misconceptions, foster culturally respectful dialogue, and enhance participation in postmortem donation. These insights have

immediate implications for accelerating cancer research and therapeutic innovation, transforming donation from a perceived ethical dilemma into a widely supported act of compassion and societal benefit.

Abbreviations: None

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Abstract

Background: Access to patient-donated tumor tissue is critical for cancer research, enabling direct study of tumor biology, microenvironmental interactions, and treatment resistance. Postmortem tumor tissue offers a vital resource, yet uptake remains limited due to logistical, cultural, and perceived religious barriers. The objectives of the study are to synthesize and clarify the positions of major U.S. religious traditions – Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism), Judaism, and Islam – regarding postmortem tumor donation for research, and to provide guidance for clinicians and families navigating this sensitive decision. **Methods:** A multidisciplinary panel of religious scholars, clinical experts, and patient advocates reviewed doctrinal sources, authoritative statements, and relevant literature to assess theological and ethical perspectives on postmortem tumor donation across major faith traditions. **Results:** Religious objections are often cited as barriers to postmortem tissue donation; however, analysis reveals broad theological and juridical support for donation when it serves the greater good of alleviating suffering and advancing medical knowledge. Across Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Islamic traditions, permissibility is generally affirmed under the principles of informed consent, respect for bodily dignity, and the sanctity of life. **Conclusions:** Postmortem tumor donation is widely supported within major U.S. religious frameworks, particularly when linked to therapeutic innovation and societal benefit. Clear communication of these positions may reduce perceived barriers, enhance participation, and accelerate progress in cancer research, while honoring the deeply personal nature of donation decisions.

Introduction

Cancer research heavily relies on tumor tissue donated by patients as it provides direct access for researchers to examine the complexity of human cancers as they exist in the body. By analyzing tumor samples, researchers can study tumor cellular biology and microenvironmental interactions and create tumor models for studying drug responses and treatment resistance. Limited access to patient tumor tissue, especially for rare cancers, is a major obstacle for cancer research^{1,2}. Postmortem tumor tissue has emerged as a vital source for research³⁻⁶, but obtaining postmortem tumor tissue from cancer patients, including children, can be challenging. The myriad factors affecting uptake of tumor donation efforts have been thoroughly examined and include logistical obstacles, lack of awareness, hesitancy by clinicians to offer or families to ask, and perceived religious contraindications⁷⁻¹¹. Dedicated postmortem tissue donation programs, of which there are over 25 worldwide, are working to tackle the complex and sensitive logistical obstacles^{4,9,11,12}. Key stakeholders, led by patient advocacy groups, have made considerable efforts to enhance parental, patient, clinician awareness and address hesitancy to offer/ask about postmortem tissue donations^{7,8,10,13}. Religious considerations represent another complex obstacle affecting postmortem tumor tissue donation for cancer research¹⁴⁻¹⁶.

Decisions surrounding the donation of one's own or a child's tumor tissue after death are deeply personal, emotionally charged, and often made under considerable stress—and thus may be

informed by one's religious beliefs. Whether tumor tissue donation for research is sanctioned within religious frameworks is nuanced and multifaceted, shaped by denomination-specific doctrines and interpretations.

Materials and Methods

We assembled a panel of religious scholars, clinical experts, and patient advocates to synthesize and clarify the positions of the predominant religious traditions represented in the United States—particularly Christianity (including Catholicism and Protestantism), Judaism, and Islam—regarding postmortem tumor donation for research to support clinicians and families navigating this option (**Table 1**).

Results

Christianity

Catholicism

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest worldwide denomination of Christians, comprising over one billion baptized Catholics^{17,18}. Rooted in its hierarchical structure and doctrinal tradition, the Catholic Church adheres closely to papal teachings and decrees. Over the past century, several popes have explicitly affirmed that organ and tissue donation constitutes a noble and altruistic act when undertaken ethically and with respect for human dignity. Pope Pius XII (1939–1958) affirmed that organ and tissue donation could be morally acceptable but that such actions must respect the dignity of the donor: "A person can lawfully dispose of his body and destine it to ends that are useful, morally irreproachable, and even noble¹⁹." Pope John Paul II (1978–2005) called organ donation "a genuine act of love," particularly when it supports "a culture of life²⁰." Pope Benedict XVI (2005–2013) declared that: "Organ donation is a unique testimony of charity... able to look beyond death so that life always wins²¹." Pope Francis (2013–2025) praised organ donation as "an expression of universal fraternity" and emphasized the moral necessity of informed consent and respect for bodily dignity²².

These authoritative endorsements of organ donation, which apply to the donation of tissues for legitimate medical research²³, must meet specific ethical conditions²⁴. The research must serve a genuine good, such as improving therapeutic options or advancing the understanding of human diseases. Informed and voluntary consent must be obtained from the donor or their legal proxy, ensuring respect for personal autonomy and dignity. The research must not involve practices that the Catholic Church considers immoral such as abortion. For deceased donations, the removal of tissue is only permitted once appropriate medical standards have unequivocally confirmed death²³.

Protestantism

The predominant religious affiliation in the United States¹⁸, Protestant Christianity encompasses a diverse array of denominations with varying theological and ethical perspectives which makes characterizing normative views on bioethical issues such as postmortem tumor tissue donation for

cancer research challenging. Unlike Roman Catholicism, Protestantism lacks a centralized authority. While most Protestant traditions approach organ or tissue donation through the lens of living recipients²⁵, distinctions between “mainline” (e.g., United Methodist Church, Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church USA) and “evangelical” (e.g., the Southern Baptist Convention, Assembly of God, and Presbyterian Church of America) denominations offer insights into shared values. Mainline groups often emphasize social justice and sacramental traditions, whereas evangelical denominations prioritize scriptural authority and personal salvation—differences that shape their respective stances on medical ethics^{26,27}.

Mainline Protestant Views

Consistent with a general emphasis on the social injunction of the Gospel, mainline position statements frame organ and tissue donation as a mode of caring for one’s neighbor and overtly encourage it.

1. The **United Methodist Church**, the largest Protestant mainline denomination¹⁸, affirms the goodness of organ and tissue donation. The United Methodist Church's Book of Discipline describes organ and tissue donation as "act(s) of charity, agape love, and self-sacrifice," and encourages "all people of faith to become organ and tissue donors as a part of their love and ministry to others in need²⁸."
2. The **Presbyterian Church USA**, in its 201st General Assembly in 1989, provided a similarly favorable view of donor organ and tissue donation. The General Assembly statement emphasized the goodness of organ and tissue donation both as a mean to bless organ and tissue recipients (including “the saving of lives, the improvement of health, the improvement of the quality of life, and the giving of sight,”) as well as benefits for donors and families, as donation “may be perceived as a positive outcome of a seemingly senseless death and is of comfort to the family of the cease²⁹.” The General Assembly therefore endorsed the practice as “in keeping with the Christian faith³⁰.”
3. The **Episcopal Church**, in a resolution in its 1982 convention, identified the “life-giving benefits of organ, blood, and tissue donation,” and encouraged “all Christians to become organ, blood and tissue donors” as “part of their ministry to others in the name of Christ, who gave his life that we may have life its fullness³¹.” This resolution was subsequently emphasized at the 1991 convention, which further “urged” all church members to “consider seriously the opportunity to donate organs after death that others may live, and that such decision be clearly stated to family, friends, church and attorney³².”

Evangelical Protestant Views

In contrast to the mainline position of encouragement, the evangelical positions qualify their endorsement by emphasizing “voluntarism” and an explicit acknowledgment of a “valid choice” to abstain from organ or tissue donation.

1. The **Southern Baptist Convention**, the largest evangelical Protestant denomination¹⁸, in a resolution passed its 1988 Annual Meeting, stated that that it encouraged “voluntarism regarding organ donations in the spirit of stewardship, compassion for the need of others, and alleviating suffering³³.” These resolutions were preceded by a recognition that “resurrection of the body does not depend on bodily wholeness at death³³.” The generosity of organ donation was framed in response to the acknowledgement that organ donation may be a faithful rejoinder to a “godless” societal emphasis on self-sufficiency that renders people “indifferent to the needs of others,” though the Convention also noted that “organ donation for research or transplantation is a matter of personal conscience³³.”
2. In the **Assembly of God** tradition, Article 13 of the 2005 General Council entitled “The Blessed Hope,” notes that “donating our organs may give the gift of life to someone else long after we have gone home to be with the Lord³⁴.” The Council statement also mentions the possibility of Christian donors stipulating that their organs be accompanied by a handwritten letter attesting to their faith and relationship with Christ. However the Council also acknowledges the alternative of refusing donation and maintaining one’s organs posthumously as a “valid choice,” dependent on “whether or not we view it right for our organs to be candidates for resource³⁴.” This statement is largely framed by a strong view of the doctrine of resurrection, and that one’s resurrection is not contingent upon an intact post-mortem body.
3. The **Presbyterian Church of America** does not provide any explicit statement on the question of organ and tissue donation.

Judaism

Judaism is an ancient and diverse faith encompassing various denominations. While Jews represent only 0.2% of the world’s population, the vast majority live in developed countries where postmortem tumor donation might be considered^{18,35}.

The Jewish definition of death: Undisputed among all Jewish denominations is that the potential donor must be declared dead prior to procurement of any bodily tissue and that it is strictly forbidden to hasten a patient’s death to facilitate postmortem tissue donation. There remains disagreement about the definition of death among Jewish scholars, where some maintain a brain-respiratory death definition while others argue that spontaneous cessation of the heart defines death³⁶. In practice, the definition of death is highly relevant when considering solid organ transplantation, where organs or tissue must be kept “alive” prior to harvesting to benefit an organ or tissue recipient. Conversely, postmortem tumor tissue donation is *de facto* after-death donation that will not be transplanted into any human recipient, so for the sake of this discussion, and to make clear for clinicians and Jewish families considering postmortem tumor tissue donation, the ongoing controversial definition of death according to Jewish law does not apply to this topic.

The Jewish legal considerations of postmortem tumor tissue donation for potential Jewish donors include:

1. **Saving human lives** (“pikku’ah nefesh”): This is a central tenet of Jewish Law and overrides almost all other laws. If the postmortem tumor tissue facilitates research that has a direct and immediate impact on saving human lives, this principle may override all other potential violations regarding respect for the dead and burial delay laws.
2. **Respect for the dead** (“kevod hamet”): This is a major principle that guides how Judaism respects and treats the body of the deceased. Jewish law prohibits deriving benefit from the deceased, and using a deceased body for research might be considered a violation of this prohibition. Additionally, Jewish law prohibits mutilating a body (“nivul hamet”) unnecessarily after death, and dissection for tumor tissue harvesting could contradict this principle. Moreover, a complete burial, including all body parts, is required by Jewish law, and removing postmortem tumor tissue to be used indefinitely for research may violate this law.
3. **Delay in burial** (“ikkuv kevarah”): The principle of respect for the dead also includes burying the deceased as soon as possible, ideally on the same day as death. A delay in burial to facilitate postmortem tissue donation could violate the principle.

Several major Jewish denominations vary in their interpretation of Jewish law, including the above concepts. Thought leaders from the major Jewish denominations have considered postmortem tissue donation or adjacent concepts and levied various interpretations (note: the **Reconstructionist** denomination has not levied a formal opinion on this topic).

- **Reform Judaism** supports postmortem tissue donation for cancer research. According to this denomination’s interpretation of Jewish law, the religious legal imperative to save life overrides the religious legal imperative to bury a body without interfering with it in any way, thus enabling autopsies, dissections, transplants, and the preservation of tissue samples. Rabbi Dr. Joan Friedman, current Chair of the Central Conference of American Rabbis Responsa Committee, wrote in a personal communication: “We are certain, based on established existing precedent, that removing cancer cells postmortem and keeping them for research, as is done with stem cells³⁷, is in no way a desecration of the dead, and that not burying them is of no more consequence than not burying strands of hair or flakes of skin that may be dislodged from a corpse, or saliva or blood that may seep from a body after death³⁸.”
- **Conservative Judaism** supports postmortem tissue donation for cancer research. The Committee on Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly voted on June 30, 2024 in favor of the following interpretation of Jewish law: “Those who wish to donate their body to medical education and science may do so³⁹.”
- **Orthodox Judaism** sanctions the use of cadaveric organs to save another’s life. At the 1993 Proceedings of the First International Colloquium of Medicine, Ethics, & Jewish Law, Rabbi Saul Israeli, Senior Member, Chief Rabbinic Council of Israel determined that “a person is not forbidden to donate an organ from his body to save someone else’s life⁴⁰.” Whether postmortem tissue used for research has the potential to imminently save

another's life like a cadaveric organ might is open to interpretation. A contemporary Orthodox Jewish authority, Rabbi Yehoram Ulman, Chief Rabbi of the Sydney, Australia Beth Din, sanctioned a postmortem tissue donation from a pediatric patient who died from progressive diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma for cancer research in 2024 (personal communication)⁴¹, thus establishing precedence for the Orthodox community.

Additional resources exist that may further help potential Jewish donors, their families, and their healthcare team navigate this challenging consideration. One such resource is the organization Ematai (ematai.org), which offers a service that can connect potential tumor tissue donors in real-time or in a scheduled manner with a Rabbi/Jewish law authority who can provide individualized advice in the context of Jewish law.

Islam

Islam, the fastest growing religious affiliation in the United States¹⁸, encompasses a rich tapestry of ethnic, racial, and intellectual diversity, reflected in its two principal theological sects—Sunni and Shia—and multiple juridical schools, including Ḥanafī, Mālikī, Shāfi'ī, Ḥanbalī, and Ja'farī. Despite this pluralism, Islamic bioethical deliberation is guided by established scholarly councils and legal authorities that employ canonical methods of ethico-legal reasoning rooted in scriptural sources to address emerging biomedical issues, such as postmortem tumor tissue donation for research.

A notable contemporary juridical opinion was issued by the Fiqh Council of North America (FCNA) in 2018, offering guidance on organ donation for Muslims residing in North America⁴². The FCNA is comprised of scholars representing diverse theological and juridical traditions which considered novel contextual factors relevant to the North American milieu. Although the opinion specifically addresses organ donation for transplantation, its underlying principles are applicable to postmortem tumor tissue donation for cancer research when such donation is intended to advance therapeutic interventions, disease management, and the broader well-being of humanity.

The FCNA affirms that organ and tissue donation is permissible in Islam under the following specific conditions: (1) the prohibition of commercial sale of organs or tissues; (2) the avoidance of significant harm to the donor or recipient; and (3) the requirement of informed consent or authorization from the donor. Applied to cancer research, these principles offer a coherent framework: the prohibition of sale is readily upheld at the point of donation, though subsequent commercialization of discoveries derived from donated tissue warrants separate ethical scrutiny; the principle of non-maleficence can be maintained through adherence to established procurement protocols that safeguard both donor dignity and research integrity; and consent must be obtained from the donor or their legal representatives. The FCNA's opinion provides a valuable resource for Muslim patients and families seeking religiously grounded insight into this complex and evolving area of bioethics. Shia and Sunni scholars in other parts of the world including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Egypt, Algiers, and UK support organ/tissue donation for transplantation, and their principles can be also applied to postmortem tumor tissue donation for research.

Discussion

There are many obstacles that may prevent postmortem tumor tissue donation for cancer research, and among them are perceived religious contraindications. However, religious perspectives, often cited as potential obstacles, are in fact frequently supportive of postmortem tumor tissue donation. Across major faith traditions—including Catholicism, mainline and evangelical Protestantism, Judaism, and Islam—there is growing theological and juridical consensus affirming the permissibility and moral value of postmortem tissue donation for research, particularly when it serves the greater good of alleviating suffering and advancing medical knowledge. While the link between cancer research and the direct alleviation of individual human suffering or saving a human life was once considered tenuous, recent advances in biomedical research have markedly enhanced this connection, transforming research into a critical driver of therapeutic innovation. Cancer research done today may very well save the life of an individual person in the very near future. These positions, articulated by authoritative religious bodies and leaders, underscore the importance of informed consent, respect for bodily dignity, and the sanctity of life. Integrating religious literacy into clinician-patient-family dialogues may help dispel misconceptions and foster ethically grounded, culturally sensitive approaches to postmortem tumor tissue donation discussions, enhancing participation and accelerating progress in cancer research. Ultimately, the decision to donate tissue postmortem for research remains a deeply personal matter, shaped by the wishes of the deceased, the perspectives of their family, and the guidance of the clinical care team.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this work.

Author Contributions (CRediT roles)

All authors contributed equally to this work. Roles include: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing, and Project Administration.

Ethics Approval

This study did not involve human subjects or animal research requiring institutional ethics approval.

Data Availability

All data supporting the findings of this study are included within the manuscript. No additional datasets were generated or analyzed.

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Lay Summary: Families sometimes worry that donating a child’s tumor tissue after death might conflict with their religious beliefs. Similarly, clinicians may hesitate to raise this topic with their patients over concerns about causing undue distress or misunderstanding. This study reviewed official teachings from major U.S. faith traditions—Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, and Islam—and found that most support donation when it helps reduce suffering and advance medical research. By sharing these positions, we hope to ease concerns, encourage informed conversations, and make it easier for families who wish to donate. These donations are vital for developing new treatments and improving outcomes for children with brain tumors.

Table 1: Religious Perspectives on Postmortem Organ and Tissue Donation

Religion/Denomination	Position	Key Statements or Authorities	Notes/Context
Christianity			
Catholic Church	Supports organ and tissue donation when done ethically and with dignity	Popes Pius XII, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis	Donation seen as noble, altruistic, and an act of love and fraternity
United Methodist Church	Supports organ and tissue donation as acts of charity and self-sacrifice	Book of Discipline	Encourages all people of faith to become donors
Presbyterian Church USA	Supports donation as a blessing and comfort	201st General Assembly (1989)	Donation aligns with Christian faith and provides comfort to families
Episcopal Church	Encourages donation as part of Christian ministry	1982 and 1991 Conventions	Emphasizes life-giving benefits and clear communication of donor intent
Southern Baptist Convention	Supports voluntary donation; personal conscience matters	1988 Annual Meeting Resolution	Resurrection not dependent on bodily wholeness; donation alleviates suffering
Assembly of God	Supports donation as a gift of life; refusal also valid	2005 General Council, Article 13	Donation may include faith testimony; resurrection doctrine central
Presbyterian Church of America	No formal statement	—	—
Judaism			
Reform Judaism	Supports postmortem tissue donation for research	Rabbi Dr. Joan Friedman	Saving life overrides burial integrity; donation not desecration
Conservative Judaism	Supports postmortem donation for education and research	Committee on Law and Standards (2024)	Donation permitted under Jewish law
Orthodox Judaism	Sanctions cadaveric organ donation; research donation open to interpretation	Rabbis Saul Israeli and Yehoram Ulman	Precedent exists for research donation; life-saving potential of tumor tissue for research debated
Reconstructionist Judaism	No formal opinion	—	—
Islam			
Sunni and Shia	Permits donation under specific conditions	Fiqh Council of North America (2018)	Conditions: no sale, no harm, informed consent; applicable to cancer research