



A Jewish burial ... the Sydney Chevra Kadisha says this would be impossible for Jewish organ donors. Photo: AJN file

Sydney chevra: organ donors 'not permitted'

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ORGAN donation is not permissible under Jewish law and a donor should not receive a Jewish burial.

This was the advice given by the Sydney Chevra Kadisha to its Brisbane counterpart in a letter, obtained by the AJN, from Sydney president David Ainsworth on August 4.

"If you are asked by someone contemplating being a donor you must tell him that this is not permitted by Jewish law and if a part is donated there can be no tahara or Jewish burial."

Ainsworth also advised that: "It follows that you should use every effort to persuade the person not to be a donor."

When contacted by the AJN this week, Ainsworth added: "We were advised that if unknowingly they had donated something it was alright but if they had knowingly gone and donated body parts then they can't [have a Jewish burial]."

Asked which rabbi's ruling the Sydney chevra was basing its position upon, Ainsworth said: "We are an Orthodox organisation; when we have a question we seek advice from a rabbi. I'm not prepared to tell you who it is, I'm sorry."

But Melbourne's Rabbi Feitel Levin, an expert in Jewish ethics, told the AJN that of the three categories of organ donation, two were largely permissible under Jewish law.

"One, while the person is still alive, such as a kidney transplant, where there is no considerable danger to the donor, would be regarded as a mitzvah [good deed]."

"The second case is a donation from a person who is dead. An organ donation after death is permitted for saving a life."

"And then there are those which are done when a person is brain dead, like heart transplants. An organ donation performed during brain death, while the heart is still beating, is problematic," Rabbi Levin said.

In stark contrast to Sydney's policy, Melbourne Chevra Kadisha president Myer Herszberg told the AJN this week: "Every Jewish person gets a Jewish burial."

Rabbi Mendel Lew, who was in

Brisbane last week from the Southend and Westcliff Hebrew Congregation in England, told a public meeting that organ donation in Jewish law was not only permissible, but a mitzvah.

"Giving an organ is the greatest gift – saving a life is paramount," Rabbi Lew said. "Donating a liver, lung, heart or kidney to save someone's life is okay, but I believe donating something like a cornea may not be because it's cosmetic and therefore not a matter of life or death."

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DAVID AINSWORTH
President, Sydney Chevra Kadisha

When told of Sydney's stance, Rabbi Lew, who has worked for more than three decades for chevra kadishas in Israel and the UK, said that while he did not want to be disrespectful to the Sydney Chevra Kadisha, he had "never heard of this" and it was "not current with Jewish thinking."

Brisbane Chevra Kadisha president John Goldman, who has nominated himself as an organ donor on his Queensland driver's license, said organ donation was permissible.

"A simple search on the internet reveals overwhelming support around the Jewish world for organ donation," Goldman said.

"I found a site run by the Halachic Organ Donor Society in New York and it lists a host of rabbis ... as organ donors."

Rabbi Nir Gurevitch from the Gold Coast Hebrew Congregation believes that a Jew can donate an organ to save a life.

"Yes, a living person may donate a kidney, even though he is placing himself in a possible dangerous situation to save another's life."

