AMPUTEES HAVE
it rough. No one ever
prays at the Kotel for
recovery of their lost limbs.
Why? Because it seems there
are some irrefutable laws of
nature that even God does not
transgress. Why is it, then,
that people sometimes pray
for their loved one to ‘wake
up’ from brain death? The
chances of recovering from
brain death are zero – exactly
the same as growing back
a human limb.

In spite of what you see on
America’s Oprah Winfrey TV
show, or read in the recently
published report authored
by Rabbi Asher Bush of the
Rabbinical Council of
America, or hear from uneducated rabbis who pressured the family
of Israeli soccer legend Avi Cohen not to donate his organs, there
has been no documented case of a brain dead patient coming
back to life. Cohen, who was declared brain dead nine days after
a motorcycle accident in late December, was denied his wish to
donate his organs after rabbis persuaded the family that he might
make a miraculous recovery.

True, the brain of a comatose person is not dead and people
sometimes recover from a coma. But once a brain dies, as it had in
Cohen’s case, it doesn’t simply stop working; it begins a process
called lyses in which its cells rapidly begin to disintegrate. This is
why the brain, unlike the heart, can’t be ‘restarted.’

Offering false hope to a desperate family is cruel to the family
and heartless to the eight other people who will die as a result of
this one person not donating his organs. But I don’t directly blame
the rabbis, who were medically ignorant or the Cohen family who
were emotionally distraught.

I blame the media. The media that report stories that mislead
the masses into thinking people can wake up from brain death. The
media that freely and incorrectly substitute the word ‘brain death’
for ‘coma,’ without recognizing the differences between them. And
the media that continues to allow its journalists to use the term ‘life
support,’ a term that should be banished for life. Using the term
“life support” implies the person is alive. So why would a family
want to donate the organs of a loved one whose life is being ‘sustained’?
“The tongue has the power of life and death” (Proverbs 18, 21).
Choose your words carefully.

A patient on a ventilator may or may not be alive depending on
the status of his brain. If the brain dies, then the human being has
died. The organism is dead but the organs are alive. The name of the
device that vents air into a patient, forcing oxygen into the lungs, is
a ventilator, not a ‘respirator’ and certainly not a ‘life-support
machine.’ If I attached a football to a ventilator, I don’t
think the media would report
that the football is on life
support.

I am not recommending that
Israel’s Ministry of Health create
a special department of “medical
censorship” for the media, some-
things akin to the military censor.
Ultimately, it is the editors and
journalists who are responsible
and should be accountable for
accuracy in their reporting.

Per capita, Israel has one of
the lowest organ donor regis-
tries of almost any other
Western country. Many factors
inhibit Jews from donating
organs: a misunderstanding of halakha (Jewish law), a superstitious
belief that God is powerless to resurrect people who were not
buried with all of their organs, and the urban myth that the hevra
kaddisha (burial society) will not bury a Jewish organ donor in a
Jewish cemetery. All of these misconceptions need to be addressed
and corrected by rabbinical authority.

But the false belief that a person can wake up from death, death
of the brain, needs to be addressed by the medical community and
it needs the help of a responsible media accurately reporting the
news. What can you – the reader – do to help? The next time you
read a news story that uses the term ‘life support’ or that implies a
brain dead patient can wake up, write a letter to the editor. It might
lead to a higher quality media and will most likely make more
human organs available for transplantation.

As a result of the non-fulfillment of Avi Cohen’s last wish to
be an organ donor (he had an organ donor card), Members of
Knesset have just submitted a bill for review that would mandate
the removal of organs from a deceased (i.e. brain dead) organ-
donor card-holder even over family objections. I understand
the lawmakers’ frustration, the desire to protect personal autonomy
and Israel’s dire need for more donors, but I believe this makes
for poor public policy.

Forcibly removing organs from a person whose family thinks
is still alive will cause them intense emotional pain and could
lead them to become physically violent towards transplant per-
sonnel who approach their loved one. I recommend less legisla-
tion and more education. At the very least, we have a right to
demand accurate reporting from the press.

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