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Nothing should stand in the way of saving a life, particularly not death.

Rabbi Reuven Bulka has spent years spreading that message within the Jewish community and beyond with limited success. He is up against centuries of the cultural belief that one should be buried "whole." This prevents people from supporting organ and tissue donation and costs lives: One person dies every three days in Ontario awaiting a life-saving transplant.

"You are trying to undo in a relatively short time, a decade or two or three, thousands of years of fundamental practices," says Bulka, 67, a longtime Rabbi in Ottawa and chair of the board at Trillium Gift of Life Network, the provincial agency mandated to organize organ and tissue donation and transplantation.

Bulka will be in Toronto Oct. 4 to participate in a forum discussing organ donation from the Jewish perspective, organized by the National Council of Jewish Women.



Loveen Kaur Gill is the founder of Amar Karma, a group that aims to create and spread awareness about organ donations in the South Asian community.

RICK EGLINTON/TORONTO STAR

"The most important thing is to change the culture of people from being takers of the health-care system to being givers," Bulka says.

It's an uphill battle. At just 12 per cent, the GTA has the lowest rate of registered donors of any jurisdiction that performs transplants. Ontario's rate overall is 19 per cent. As of Sept. 29, there are 1,547 people awaiting life-saving organ transplants in Ontario.

Urban centres typically have fewer registered donors than smaller jurisdictions — to compare, 44 per cent of people in Sudbury have signed up. But there is "every indication" the GTA's notoriously rich diversity of culture is a factor, Bulka says.

Some cultures believe it is critical to preserve the integrity of the body. That's why Trillium engages religious and cultural leaders to help dispel those myths that preclude donation. "When they see positive examples of this in their community, it can make a very big difference," says Versha Prakash, vice-president of Operations and Communications.

No religion prohibits organ donation.

When transplant became viable decades ago, religious leaders made a tactical error in merely allowing donation, rather than making it an imperative, Bulka says. "We have to change it so that it's not only okay to do it, it's not okay *not* to do it," he says.

The Koran strongly supports donation, says Imam Hamid Slimi, chairman of the Canadian Council of Imams. "Saving a life is tantamount to saving humankind," he says. "I don't see it done a lot in the Muslim world, we need to do more."

Slimi says many Imams campaign continuously and can usually convince people simply with common sense, but he acknowledges a gap between the scholars and the common people.

Still, he insists, it's an educational issue more than a cultural one.

Scriptures can also be found in the Hindu faith to support organ donation.

Dr. Budhendraauth Doobay is a vascular surgeon in St. Catharines, who is trying to shift views in the Hindu community, where members regularly discount organ donation. "It is taboo among Indians and people from the East," he says. "They feel as though they don't want you to break the body, they feel it's a mutilation process."

Doobay, whose father was a Hindu priest, fields calls from doctors to help approach Hindu families and ask for consent when a loved one is about to pass. Most often the answer is no.

He uses any opportunity to advise Hindus that the body is merely a vessel and it's the spirit that counts. "By teaching them that, hopefully they will understand the kidneys they have, the lungs they have, the eyes they have — if it is good, they should give it away," Doobay says.

Mississauga resident Loveen Kaur Gill, who was born in India, began a non-profit organization last year to make South Asians aware that donating organs and tissue will not impact reincarnation. Her childhood friend died at 13 waiting for a kidney transplant and the experience haunted her.

Many people believe if they donate organs in this life, they will be reborn without them, says Gill, whose group [Amar Karma Organ Donor Society](http://amarkarma.org) (amarkarma.org), which means eternal actions, holds monthly events to change attitudes and encourage people to register at beadonor.ca.

"I realized our community needed something like this," she says.

The diversity of the GTA is not going to change. "What we have to change is the attitudes that prevail within those diverse populations," Bulka says.

Tonight's event takes place at the Council House, 4700 Bathurst St., from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m.