"In Rav Moshe’s earliest tshuva from 1968, he wrote organ transplantation was double murder because back then he had heard they were removing organs from patients whose EEG was flat, which only meant they were in a coma. Since the person was autonomously breathing he was alive according to halacha so removing the heart was murder. And the recipients died just a few days later so it was like a double murder. But the later tshuva from 1976 talks about a person whose breathing is not autonomous but simply mechanical via a ventilator. Rav Moshe said this type of “breathing” is not a sign of human life, and if the brain is dead the person is dead. And by this time the recipients began to live for years after the transplant. So there is no contradiction between the teshuvot of 1968 and 1976. It was a change in circumstances. The first tshuva talks about someone who is breathing on his own and the second teshuva talks about someone who is not breathing on his own. That’s the difference. It’s as simple as that."

"I called Rav Moshe twice to discuss his teshuvot on this issue and he explained to me that when the brain is destroyed it is equivalent to the severing of the head because when the mishna says “head” it does not mean the skull, it means the brain. I heard Rav Moshe say that once we know that the person’s autonomous breathing has irreversibly stopped by using the Apnea test he is dead.

"In the summer of 1975 I met with Rav Moshe and my father-in-law in Monsey and we discussed the issue of pulling the plug. It was Rav Moshe’s opinion that an unconscious person in the hospital who seems to be dead and his brain-stem is dead, even if his heart is still beating, the plug should be pulled and the organs should be donated."

"In some cases] the ventilator inflates the lungs even though [the patient] is actually dead. Breathing of this kind is not regarded as a sign of life… Breathing by means of a machine does not satisfy the halachic definition of respiration, and therefore the patient is considered to be dead as long as the other criteria [no response to any stimuli] is met. If it is determined that the blood circulation does not reach the base of the brain, it is obvious that the brain must have begun to show the physical signs of destruction referred to as lysis… after extensive lysis it is as if the head had been removed from the body or the person decapitated."


"In a patient presenting the clinical picture of death, i.e. no signs of life such as movement or response to stimuli, the total cessation of independent respiration is an absolute proof that death has occurred."

May 24, 1976 (24 Iyar 5736), in a letter from Rav Moshe Feinstein that was sent to New York State Assemblyman Mel Miller, and which was published in  Jewish Medical Ethics, Vol. II. No. 2, May 1995.

"Even though the heart is capable of pumping for several more days, nevertheless, as long as the patient is unable to breathe on his own, he is considered dead."

November 14, 1985 (Rosh Chodesh Kislev 5746) in a letter from Rav Moshe Feinstein to Dr. Elliot Bondi, which was published in the ASSIA Book, Vol. 7, page 148 -148(a).