African American Myths about Organ Donation: *Will The Disparity Gap Ever Close?*

*By Shannon Burgess*

African Americans have always lagged behind other minorities when it comes to certain social topics. Educating the African American community on the social issues regarding organ, tissue, and eye donation has been a real task for Cleveland MOTTEP and its staff members. Through outreach the issue has gone from being a topic that no one individual in the family spoke upon to the topic of life and death for a lot of African American minorities in the community.

It is no mystery that within the African American community religion is a staple. African Americans gives 25% more monetary gifts to religion and other community charities than any other ethnic group “African-Americans, for instance, give away 25 percent more of their income per year than whites and 63 percent of Latino households now make charitable donations” this charitable donation is mostly given to the community through the church and philanthropy. So, why does the African American community lag behind in organ, tissue, and eye donation? What is keeping the community from donating the gift of life? How can a community that believe in giving to God so strongly not believe in entertaining the thought of giving life after death or while still alive if the anatomical gift is going to save another? These questions are mind blowing and the answers stem back intergenerational and are myths have been passed down through the community, and the family. Regarding religious beliefs and superstitions, African Americans, South Asians and Chinese share many of the same sentiments in wanting to ‘remain whole’ when they transition to heaven (Callender 1987; Kometsi & Louw 1999; Darr & Randhawa 1999), and fear that organ donation mutilates the body, inhibiting an open casket funeral (Delong 1990; Darr & Randhawa 1999; Gillmann 1999; Boulware et al. 2002a,b; Durand et al. 2002).

African Americans have very strong beliefs when it comes to resurrection and the after life. Most believe that a person’s body has to be intact in order to be fully accepted into heaven “African Americans believe their physical bodies will be needed in heaven without critically analyzing how these two beliefs are inconsistent with each other.

It must be noted that none of the clergy were aware of the formal positions that their respective denominations have on the issue of organ and tissue donation, although each of the denominations represented in this study were supportive of organ and tissue donation” (Arriola; Perryman; Doldren; et al. 2007).

Another factor that play a part into why African Americans do not donate are the infamous Tuskegee experiment “Tuskegee experiment as having laid a foundation for this distrust, although certainly medical experimentation on people of African descent had existed long before then” (Arriola; Perryman; Doldren; et al. 2007). The distrust that the African
American community has in the medical system stills retort back to this heinous incident. Many African Americans in the community still cannot seem to move beyond what happened to many African Americans and is a major reason why donation in the community is and still at an all time low. Even with the young teenagers of today who were not born at the time of the incident still have doubt about the US medical institution, because the stories have been passed down to them by older relatives. This is another road block that Cleveland MOTTEP is trying to removes through education and outreach.

Intergenerational and Community Myths:

- Myth: If I agree to donate my organs, the hospital staff won't work as hard to save my life.
- Myth: Maybe I won't really be dead when they sign my death certificate.
- Myth: Organ donation is against my religion.
- Myth: I'm under age 18. I'm too young to make this decision.
- Myth: An open-casket funeral isn't an option for people who have donated organs or tissues.
- Myth: Because I poor Rich and famous people go to the top of the list when they need a donor organ..
- Myth: My organs may be sold on the black market.
- I need to be whole when I get to heaven

Why you should consider organ donation

By donating your organs after death you can save up to 50 lives.

It's especially important to consider becoming an organ donor if you belong to an ethnic minority. Minorities including African-Americans, Asians and Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, and Hispanics are more likely than whites to have certain chronic conditions that affect the kidney, heart, lung, pancreas and liver. Certain blood types are more prevalent in
ethnic minority populations. Because matching blood type is usually necessary for transplants, the need for minority donor organs is especially high.

