**Pakistani and a Pig**

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We all know that the religion Islam prohibits the eating of the flesh of swine, as it is a sin and impiety to do so. But what will you do, when you are about to die, and that son of a pig can save your life?

A couple of weeks ago, the headlines of American media shocked the world, when surgeons at the University of Maryland Medical Center transplanted a genetically altered pig heart into a human. Physicians and scientists worldwide have, for decades, been pursuing the goal of transplanting animal organs into people, known as xenotransplantation, but many ethical and technical hurdles remain.

An interesting thing about this medical history is that a Pakistani-born surgeon Dr Muhammad Mohiuddin was leading the research team. He is also the director of the Cardiac Xenotransplantation Program at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. It was a proud moment for the Pakistani American community, so I decided to talk to the general Pakistani public at a local shopping mall where dozens of Pakistani restaurants and grocery stores are running their businesses, to know what they feel about it, and the reaction was surprising.

“He (Pakistani surgeon) will rot in hell,” said a Pakistani man in his early 30s. “I will be dead rather than getting a pig’s heart into my body,” he came up with a straight answer when I tried to argue. Another gentleman who works at a local mobile shop says that why this Pakistani surgeon chose to get a pig for the heart transplant, there are other animals, hundreds of kinds. “Would you accept a donkey’s heart, ” I asked. “Are you crazy, why would I get the donkey’s heart”, he replied. I was curious to know so I asked which animal you would like if you needed a transplant and he asked me to leave the shop. And there are dozens of other Pakis who came out with the same argument and told me not to cover this story as it is also “Haram” to promote such a sin.

A surgeons at the University of Maryland Medical Center transplanted a genetically altered pig heart into a human.

The interaction with my community took me twenty years back when I was travelling in public transport in Islamabad, and we all passengers saw a herd of hogs running at the sides of the woods in “Shakarparain” a tourist spot. “Hey, look there are pigs running, I shouted”. And I got a slap on my neck from a passenger behind me. It was so hard that I felt the palm of that open hand and a whistle in my ear. And an older guy must be in his 50s at that time telling me that even calling the name of this animal is a big sin. “Don’t ever do that”.

Even living in America while covering this story it felt so true that even calling the name of this animal is a big sin as it was also reflected in the statement of Pakistan’s Ambassador Dr Asad Majeed Khan when he appreciated the Pakistani surgeon without mentioning the name of the animal. “I congratulated Dr Mohammad Mohiuddin on his path-breaking transplant surgery. I told him how proud all Pakistani Americans were of this remarkable achievement by a fellow community member”, a press statement of the Pakistani Ambassador said. As per tradition, I also got a call from the media office to publish and on-air the comments, but I asked what about that pig, the donor of this historical transplant. Why has the Ambassador not mentioned the name of the animal? The media officer while laughing out loud said that “you want us to be terminated from our jobs”.

However, despite all this hue and cry, there are many other Pakis who appreciated this milestone surgery and congratulated Pakistani surgeon, Dr Mohammad Mohiuddin. It is worth mentioning that the researchers had applied to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to do a clinical trial of the pig hearts in the people but were turned down. According to Mohammad Mohiuddin, the agency was concerned about ensuring that the pigs came from a medical-grade facility and wanted the researchers to transplant the hearts into ten baboons before moving on to people. But 57-year-old David Bennett gave Mohiuddin’s team a chance to jump straight to a human transplant.

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