

Original Research Article

Awareness about eye donation in medical undergraduates across Maharashtra: a cross-sectional study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Corneal blindness is a major health concern in India, where donor shortages persist despite transplantation being the primary restorative therapy. This study assessed the knowledge, awareness, and attitudes regarding eye donation among MBBS students and interns across Maharashtra.

Methods: A cross-sectional study surveyed 755 MBBS students and interns across Maharashtra (April to December 2024) using purposive sampling. Data gathered via a self-administered Google form were evaluated using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages).

Results: Among 755 participants (53.7% male, 90% urban, 84.7% Hindu), 98.8% knew eyes can be donated, learning primarily from social media (39.2%) and textbooks (33.5%). Most recognized the cornea as the transplantable tissue (89%), keratoplasty as the surgical procedure (82.1%), the 4-6-hour post-mortem retrieval window (57.5%), and universal eligibility across genders (95.6%) and blood groups (96%). However, only 32.8% correctly identified Optisol GS as the storage medium (30.3% chose formalin), 29.1% knew of nearby eye banks, and 54.5% recognized national programs. While 64.5% were willing to pledge their eyes and 66.8% acknowledged a national donor deficit, direct exposure was low: only 34.6% knew a donor and 28.1% knew a recipient.

Conclusions: Despite high baseline awareness and positive attitudes, significant gaps exist in procedural and preservation protocols. Structured training, eye-bank postings, and practical exposure are vital to equip future clinicians for effective donor advocacy.

Keywords: Attitudes, Corneal transplantation, Health knowledge, Medical, Practice, Students, Tissue and organ procurement

INTRODUCTION

Corneal blindness continues to be one of the major causes of visual impairment worldwide and remains a significant public health challenge in developing countries such as India. Unlike many other causes of blindness, corneal blindness is potentially reversible through corneal transplantation, thereby making eye donation an essential component in the prevention and control of avoidable blindness.¹ India carries a substantial burden of corneal

blindness, and despite improvements in ophthalmic services and eye banking infrastructure, the availability of donor corneas remains far below the actual requirement.^{1,2}

Eye donation is the process of donating eyes after death for therapeutic purposes, mainly for corneal transplantation. Awareness and willingness regarding eye donation are strongly influenced by social beliefs, cultural attitudes, knowledge levels, and exposure to health

education. Recent studies have reported that misconceptions regarding facial disfigurement after eye retrieval, religious concerns, lack of family support, and inadequate information regarding the donation procedure continue to be major barriers affecting eye donation practices.³ Although awareness regarding eye donation has improved over the years due to media campaigns and public health initiatives, detailed knowledge regarding contraindications, retrieval timing, storage, and eye banking services remains inadequate among the general population as well as healthcare trainees.^{3,4}

Medical students represent an important group in promoting eye donation awareness because they are future healthcare providers and opinion leaders within the community. Their understanding and perception regarding eye donation can significantly influence patient counselling, public education, and advocacy programs. Exposure to medical education and clinical postings is expected to enhance awareness and encourage a positive attitude toward organ and tissue donation. However, recent studies conducted among undergraduate students have demonstrated variability in knowledge and willingness regarding eye donation, indicating the need for continued educational reinforcement.^{4,5}

Maharashtra, being one of the most urbanized and educationally advanced states in India, possesses a large network of medical colleges and healthcare institutions. Nevertheless, there is limited multicentric evidence regarding the awareness and perception of eye donation among medical students across the state. Assessing the level of awareness and willingness among MBBS students and interns is important to identify existing gaps and strengthen future awareness initiatives. Therefore, the present study was undertaken to evaluate the awareness, knowledge, attitude, and willingness regarding eye donation among medical students across Maharashtra.

METHODS

Study design

The present study was conducted using a cross-sectional study design.

Study setting

The study was carried out in various medical colleges across Maharashtra.

Study period

The study was conducted from April 2024 to December 2024.

Study population

The study population included undergraduate MBBS students and internship students studying in medical

colleges across Maharashtra who were available during the study period and willing to participate were included in the study.

Sampling technique

A purposive sampling method was adopted for the selection of study participants.

Sample size

A total of 755 participants were included in the study.

Inclusion criteria

All MBBS students from first year to internship who voluntarily consented to participate in the study were included.

Exclusion criteria

Students who submitted incomplete responses were excluded from the study.

Study tool

Data were collected using a pre-structured, self-administered questionnaire designed in Google forms.

Data collection procedure

The questionnaire link was circulated online through academic and social media platforms to medical students across Maharashtra. Responses were collected electronically during the study period.

Ethical considerations

Participation in the study was voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were maintained throughout the study, and no personal identifiers were collected from the respondents.

Statistical analysis

Data were downloaded from Google forms, cleaned, and curated in Microsoft Excel. Statistical evaluation was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 25.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). Descriptive variables were summarized as absolute frequencies (n) and relative percentages (%).

RESULTS

A total of 755 medical students from Maharashtra participated in the survey. Most respondents were from urban areas (90.0%), and 53.7% were male. Hindu participants constituted 84.7% of the sample. The largest reported age group was 21 years (216 students), followed

by 22 years (166) and 20 years (120). Parent occupation was most commonly business (28.6%) or doctor (26.6%).

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of participants (n=755).

Characteristics	Category	N	%
Sex	Male	405	53.7
	Female	350	46.3
Residence	Urban	680	90.0
	Rural	75	10.0
Religion	Hindu	639	84.7
	Muslim	80	10.6
	Sikh	15	2.0
	Jain	8	1.1
	Christian	8	1.1
	Buddhist	5	0.7
Age (years)	18	42	5.6
	19	102	13.5
	20	120	15.9
	21	216	28.6
	22	166	22.0
	23	66	8.7
	24	43	5.7
Parent occupation	Businessperson	216	28.6
	Doctor	201	26.6
	Government employee	120	16.0
	Teacher	80	10.6
	Farmer	30	4.0
	Other occupations	108	14.2

Table 2: General awareness and knowledge regarding eye donation (n=755).

Variables	Response	N	%
Self-reported adequate knowledge	Yes	421	55.8
	No	110	14.6
	Maybe	224	29.6
Awareness that eyes can be donated	Yes	746	98.8
	No	9	1.2
Source of information	Social media	296	39.2
	Books	253	33.5
	Family/friends	140	18.5
	Newspaper	66	8.7
Part of eye donated	Cornea	672	89.0
	Eyeball	45	6.0
	Lens	23	3.0
	Conjunctiva	15	2.0
Timing of eye donation	During life	9	1.2
	After death	251	33.3
	Both	495	65.6
Name of the transplantation procedure	Keratoplasty	620	82.1
	Keratoconus	65	8.6
	LASIK surgery	58	7.7
	Cataract surgery	12	1.6

Awareness regarding eye donation was high, with 746 (98.8%) participants reporting awareness that eyes can be donated. Social media was the most frequently reported source of information (296; 39.2%), followed by books (253; 33.5%), family and friends (140; 18.5%), and newspapers (66; 8.7%). The cornea was identified as the donated part by 672 (89.0%) participants. Regarding the timing of eye donation, 495 (65.6%) selected both during life and after death, while 251 (33.3%) selected after death and 9 (1.2%) selected during life. Keratoplasty was identified as the transplantation procedure by 620 (82.1%) participants.

Table 3: Knowledge of the eye-donation procedure and indications for corneal transplantation

Variables	Response	N	%
Ideal time to retrieve eyes after death	2-4 hours	205	27.2
	4-6 hours	434	57.5
	6-8 hours	95	12.6
	8-10 hours	21	2.7
Number of people potentially helped by one donor	1	69	9.1
	2	603	79.9
	3	16	2.1
	4	67	8.9
Indications for corneal transplantation identified	Keratoconus	—	72.2
	Chemical injury	—	65.8
	Corneal ulcers	—	62.8
	Infective keratitis	—	61.1
	Retinal detachment	—	26.4
	Cataract	—	22.5

Regarding procedural knowledge, 434 (57.5%) participants selected 4-6 hours as the ideal time for eye retrieval after death. Most participants (603; 79.9%) indicated that one donor could potentially help two individuals. Among the listed indications for corneal transplantation, keratoconus was most frequently identified (72.2%), followed by chemical injury (65.8%), corneal ulcers (62.8%) and infective keratitis (61.1%). Retinal detachment (26.4%) and cataract (22.5%) were less frequently identified.

Regarding eligibility criteria, 721 (95.6%) participants reported that both males and females could donate eyes, while 725 (96.0%) recognized that all blood groups were eligible. For age eligibility, 415 (55.0%) selected 1-80 years, and 335 (44.4%) selected all age groups. When asked whether eye donation could help a completely blind person, 392 (51.9%) responded “maybe,” 267 (35.4%) responded “yes,” and 96 (12.7%) responded “no.” Among the conditions identified as compatible with eye donation, spectacle use (77.7%), previous cataract surgery (60.7%) and hypertension (60.5%) were frequently selected. HIV infection (78.0%), hepatitis B (61.0%) and rabies (55.8%) were the most frequently identified contraindications.

Table 4: Knowledge of eligibility criteria and conditions associated with eye donation (n=755).

Domain	Response/category	N	%
Eligible age	0-1 year	5	0.7
	1-80 years	415	55.0
	All age groups	335	44.4
Eligible sex	Male only	17	2.2
	Female only	17	2.2
	Both	721	95.6
Blood group requirement	Only O	15	2.0
	Only AB	15	2.0
	All blood groups	725	96.0
Can eye donation help a completely blind person?	Yes	267	35.4
	No	96	12.7
	Maybe	392	51.9
Conditions identified as eligible for eye donation	Spectacle users	—	77.7
	Previous cataract surgery	—	60.7
	Hypertension	—	60.5
	Diabetes	—	53.6
	COVID-19	—	26.7
	Optic nerve disease	—	18.8
	HIV infection	—	8.9
	HIV infection	—	78.0
Conditions identified as contraindications	Hepatitis B	—	61.0
	Rabies	—	55.8
	Unknown cause of death	—	32.6
	Tuberculosis	—	28.5
	Cataract	—	28.0
	Diabetes	—	26.8
	LASIK surgery	—	19.9

Table 5: Knowledge regarding preservation, storage and complications (n=755).

Variables	Response	N	%
Transport medium after extraction	Normal saline	115	15.2
	Optisol-GS	248	32.8
	TPF liquid	163	21.6
	Formalin	229	30.3
Duration of storage	4 days	282	37.4
	7 days	149	19.7
	12 days	69	9.1
	14 days	255	33.8
Time to transplantation after extraction	24 hours	282	37.4
	48 hours	359	47.5
	72 hours	74	9.8
	96 hours	40	5.3
Possible surgical complications	Graft rejection	105	13.9
	Astigmatism	59	7.8
	Glaucoma	38	5.0
	All listed complications	553	73.2

Among the respondents, Optisol-GS was the most frequently selected transport medium after extraction (248; 32.8%), followed by formalin (229; 30.3%), TPF liquid (163; 21.6%) and normal saline (115; 15.2%).

Regarding storage duration, 282 (37.4%) selected 4 days, while 255 (33.8%) selected 14 days. For the time to transplantation after extraction, 359 (47.5%) selected 48 hours, followed by 282 (37.4%) who selected 24 hours.

Regarding possible surgical complications, 553 (73.2%) selected all listed complications, while graft rejection, astigmatism and glaucoma were selected individually by 105 (13.9%), 59 (7.8%) and 38 (5.0%) respondents, respectively.

Table 6: Knowledge regarding eye banks and national programmes (n=755).

Variables	Response	N	%
Understanding of an eye bank	Retrieved eyes examined	46	6.1
	Retrieved eyes stored	131	17.4
	Link between donor and hospital	88	11.7
	All listed functions	490	64.9
Local eye-bank contact number†	108	103	13.6
	1919	576	76.3
	100	30	4.0
	102	46	6.1
Aware of an eye bank nearby	Yes	220	29.1
	No	399	52.8
	Maybe	136	18.0
Aware of a national programme related to eye donation	Yes	412	54.6
	No	343	45.4

Regarding the functions of an eye bank, 490 (64.9%) respondents identified all the listed functions, while 131 (17.4%) identified the storage of retrieved eyes, 88 (11.7%) identified the link between donors and hospitals, and 46 (6.1%) identified examination of retrieved eyes. For the local eye-bank contact number, 576 (76.3%) selected 1919, while 103 (13.6%) selected 108, 46 (6.1%) selected 102 and 30 (4.0%) selected 100. Only 220 (29.1%) respondents reported awareness of an eye bank nearby, whereas 399 (52.8%) were unaware and 136 (18.0%) responded “maybe.” Awareness of a national programme related to eye donation was reported by 412 (54.6%) respondents, while 343 (45.4%) reported no awareness.

Regarding personal exposure to eye donation, 261 (34.6%) respondents knew someone who had donated eyes, while 212 (28.1%) knew someone who had received donated eyes. Awareness regarding the buying or selling of donor eyes was reported by 393 (52.1%) respondents. A perceived shortage of eye donors in India was reported by 504 (66.8%), while 45 (6.0%) disagreed and 206 (27.3%) responded “maybe.” Overall, 495 (65.6%) respondents expressed willingness to pledge their eyes for donation, whereas 260 (34.4%) were unwilling.

Table 7: Attitudes, perceptions and personal exposure to eye donation (n=755).

Variables	Response	N	%
Knows someone who donated eyes	Yes	261	34.6
	No	494	65.4
Knows someone who received donated eyes	Yes	212	28.1
	No	543	71.9
Awareness regarding buying/selling of donor eyes	Yes	393	52.1
	No	362	47.9
Perception of shortage of eye donors in India	Yes	504	66.8
	No	45	6.0
	Maybe	206	27.3
Willingness to pledge eyes for donation	Yes	495	65.6
	No	260	34.4

DISCUSSION

The present study assessed the knowledge, awareness, and attitudes regarding eye donation among medical students and interns in Maharashtra. The findings demonstrated high overall awareness regarding eye donation; however, significant gaps persisted in procedural knowledge, eligibility criteria, eye banking services, and practical aspects of corneal transplantation. The study also revealed a generally positive attitude toward eye donation, with a substantial proportion of participants willing to pledge their eyes after death.

In the present study, 98.8% of participants were aware that eyes can be donated. Similar findings were reported by Kumar et al, who documented awareness levels approaching 98% among healthcare students.⁶ Darade et al also reported that nearly all participants had heard about eye donation among medical students in Western Vidarbha.⁷ The consistently high awareness observed across studies may be attributed to increasing exposure through medical education, digital media platforms, and national eye donation campaigns conducted during eye donation fortnight.

In the current study, social media (39.2%) and books (33.5%) emerged as the major sources of information regarding eye donation. This finding reflects the changing dynamics of information dissemination among younger populations. Similar findings were observed by Darade et al, where educational exposure and digital communication significantly contributed to awareness regarding eye donation.⁷ The increasing influence of social media observed in the present study indicates the expanding role of digital health communication in promoting organ and tissue donation awareness among youth and healthcare trainees.

Knowledge regarding the anatomical part donated was satisfactory in the present study, with 89% correctly identifying the cornea as the transplantable tissue. Robert et al. similarly found that a majority of medical interns and postgraduate students were aware that corneal tissue is used for transplantation.⁸ However, misconceptions still persisted among a small proportion of participants who believed that the entire eyeball or lens is transplanted. These misconceptions emphasize the need for focused ophthalmic education during undergraduate training.

With respect to the ideal time for eye retrieval after death, 57.5% of participants correctly identified 4-6 hours as the recommended interval. Kumar et al reported that only 39.7% of participants correctly knew that eye retrieval should occur within six hours after death.⁶ Although the present study demonstrated comparatively better knowledge, a substantial proportion of respondents still lacked accurate procedural understanding. Timely retrieval remains critical for preservation of corneal viability, and inadequate knowledge among future healthcare professionals may adversely affect counseling practices and donor mobilization.

In the present study, 82.1% of participants correctly identified keratoplasty as the surgical procedure associated with eye donation. Mudhol et al observed that postgraduate students and healthcare professionals demonstrated significantly better knowledge regarding corneal transplantation procedures compared to undergraduates.⁹ This highlights the importance of integrating ophthalmology and transplantation-related teaching earlier into undergraduate clinical postings.

Regarding eligibility criteria, 95.6% correctly stated that both sexes can donate eyes, and 96% knew that all blood groups are eligible for eye donation. These findings indicate adequate conceptual awareness among medical students. However, uncertainty persisted regarding age eligibility and the possibility of restoring sight in completely blind individuals. More than half of the participants (51.9%) responded “maybe” when asked whether eye donation could help completely blind persons. Similar uncertainty has been documented in previous Indian studies where participants demonstrated awareness but lacked confidence regarding transplantation outcomes and indications.⁷

Knowledge regarding preservation media and storage duration was comparatively inadequate in the current study. Only 32.8% correctly identified Optisol GS as the preservation medium, while many participants incorrectly selected formalin. Similar deficiencies in technical and procedural knowledge were reported by Robert et al. among medical interns and postgraduate students.⁸ Such findings are important because healthcare professionals are often involved in counseling families immediately after death, and inaccurate information may reduce successful eye retrieval rates.

The present study also evaluated awareness regarding eye banks and national programmes related to eye donation. Although 64.9% correctly understood the functions of an eye bank, only 29.1% were aware of nearby eye banks. Furthermore, awareness regarding national programmes related to eye donation was observed in only 54.5% of participants. Previous Indian studies have similarly reported poor awareness regarding eye bank services and local contact systems among healthcare students.⁶ Strengthening exposure to eye banking systems during clinical postings may help bridge this gap.

Attitude toward eye donation in the present study was encouraging. Approximately 64.5% of participants expressed willingness to pledge their eyes for donation. Comparable willingness rates have been reported in recent studies among medical students and healthcare professionals. Darade et al reported favourable attitudes toward eye donation among medical students in Maharashtra.⁷ Positive attitudes among medical students are particularly important because they can influence public perception and promote community participation in eye donation initiatives.

The present study also found that 66.8% of participants perceived a shortage of eye donors in India. This perception aligns with recent national concerns regarding the gap between demand and availability of donor corneas. Recent reports from eye banking authorities emphasize the national target of scaling up eye collection to bridge the persistent demand-supply deficit in corneal transplantation across India.¹⁰ Despite improvements in awareness campaigns, India continues to face substantial shortages of donor corneal tissue, particularly in rural and underserved regions.

Recent public health initiatives and institutional campaigns have increasingly focused on promoting eye and organ donation among youth and healthcare workers. Structured educational drives and institutional campaigns have highlighted the significant role of healthcare students in driving community engagement and improving societal acceptance of tissue and organ donation.¹¹ Such initiatives may contribute toward improving societal acceptance and donor registration rates in the future.

Overall, the findings of the present study indicate that although awareness and attitudes regarding eye donation among medical students are satisfactory, important deficiencies persist in procedural knowledge, eye banking systems, preservation techniques, and practical aspects of transplantation. As future healthcare providers, medical students play a pivotal role in motivating families and promoting eye donation. Therefore, structured educational interventions, curricular integration, eye bank exposure visits, and targeted awareness programmes are essential to improve comprehensive knowledge and translate positive attitudes into actual donation practices.

A major strength of this study is its substantial sample size (n=755) spanning medical colleges across Maharashtra, capturing responses from undergraduate MBBS students through interns. It provides a granular evaluation of both general perceptions and critical technical domains- such as storage media, harvest windows, and local eye-banking networks- identifying precise curricular targets. The electronic format ensured participant anonymity and voluntary participation, minimizing social-desirability bias on sensitive donation topics.

However, several limitations should be noted. The reliance on purposive sampling and online dissemination via social media may introduce self-selection bias toward digitally active students interested in organ donation. The cross-sectional design captures baseline awareness but cannot establish long-term retention or evaluate whether positive attitudes translate into actual donor pledges. Furthermore, the study population was predominantly urban (90%), potentially limiting generalizability to trainees in rural or resource-constrained settings. Finally, self-administered questionnaires carry the inherent risk of recall bias or unverified self-reporting regarding personal knowledge and attitudes.

CONCLUSION

The present study examines knowledge, awareness, and attitudes toward eye donation among MBBS students and interns in Maharashtra, revealing high overall awareness but notable deficiencies in technical and procedural understanding related to corneal transplantation and eye banking. Most participants were aware that eyes can be donated posthumously, influenced by ongoing awareness campaigns and educational resources. They had a satisfactory grasp of the cornea as the transplantable tissue and eligibility criteria, indicating improved theoretical awareness among medical students.

However, critical gaps in practical knowledge emerged, particularly concerning preservation media, storage conditions, and awareness of local eye banks and national programs. Misunderstandings about procedural aspects indicate insufficient exposure to practical ophthalmology during their education, potentially undermining their future roles in patient counselling and donation advocacy.

Despite positive attitudes towards eye donation and expressed willingness to pledge their eyes, this does not consistently lead to donor registration or advocacy, highlighting the necessity for ongoing motivational interventions. The study emphasizes the urgent need for structured educational strategies to enhance understanding of eye donation among medical students. Suggested measures include integrating eye donation topics into curricula, conducting clinical demonstrations, facilitating interactive workshops, and organizing eye bank visits.

Additionally, community engagement and awareness campaigns should address misconceptions about donor eligibility and preservation processes, involving collaborations with medical schools, eye banks, and public health organizations. Utilizing digital tools and social media can enhance outreach, particularly among younger audiences. In conclusion, while medical students show favourable awareness and attitudes toward eye donation, targeted educational interventions are essential to fill the gaps in practical knowledge, ultimately contributing to increased donor availability and the success of national eye donation programs in India.

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