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U.K. to have New Organ Donation Law

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The U.K. government has announced new plans to change the law for organ and tissue donation to address the urgent need for organs within Indian-origin community in the country.

- Under the proposed new system of consent for organ and tissue donation, it will be presumed that people have agreed to transplants unless they specifically opt out.
- Like India, the UK followed the opt-in system - whereby families' decision to donate organs of their loved one after death is discretionary.
 - The UK government is now moving towards adopting legislation favouring the opt-out system to address the growing crisis in the country.
- The new system is expected to come into effect in England in 2020 as part of a drive to help Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people.

Background

- The announcement came after a report called on the National Health Service (NHS) to take more proactive action to address the high death rate among Indian-origin people in Britain due to low levels of organ donation within the community.
 - 21% of people who died on the organ donation waiting list in the U.K. last year were from a BAME background.
- The 'Organ Donation: Breaking Taboos Amongst British BAME Communities' report by the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust was aimed at studying the low levels of donation among BAME communities in the UK.
 - According to NHS records, only 7% of donors last year were from BAME backgrounds, with Indians accounting for just 1.9%.
- These communities are seen as generally less inclined to opt for organ donation, largely due to deeply-entrenched cultural and religious beliefs discouraging organ donation.
 - Family refusal is one of the biggest obstacles to organ donation among the UK's Asian communities since death is a sensitive and highly emotive issue for them.

Way Forward

- The success of this initiative by UK will depend on the degree and efficacy of engagement with the BAME populations.
- For the programme to succeed, it will have to sufficiently addresses the core issues surrounding beliefs and specific cultures and aims at normalising and encouraging prior family conversations about organ donation in these families.
- Evidence from countries like India show that it is possible to counter religious and cultural beliefs around organ donation.

India has seen a 10-fold increase in its organ donation consent rates over the last decade as a result of sustained public awareness programmes, policy initiatives, and multi-stakeholder collaboration, the findings reveal.