Tainted Blood Policy

November 21, 2011 By Reed Vreeland

Regulations instituted in 1983 by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) currently prohibit any man who has had male sexual contact since 1977 from donating blood in the United States. The ban aimed to protect the blood supply at a time when screening tests for HIV did not yet exist and thousands of people were being infected by HIV-tainted transfusions and blood products. While it most certainly saved lives and prevented new infections in the early days of the epidemic, today it unfairly singles out gay men. The ban is "medically and scientifically unwarranted," according to the American Red Cross and America's Blood Centers, which account for the majority of the U.S. blood supply. England, Australia, Japan and Sweden have scrapped their blood bans on men who have sex with men (MSM) and adopted a 12-month sex-free deferral period, which allows MSM to donate only if they haven't had sex with another man within the past year. Will the United States soon follow suit?

Here, we share some of your comments on the policies that restrict MSM from giving blood.

> I have been a blood donor for the last 21 years, until this past September when I was diagnosed HIV positive. I am a straight, married man. We need to educate the country again about HIV/AIDS and have this ban on MSM lifted. All the blood gets tested anyway.
> —**Anthony, Queens**

> My partner and I have been in a monogamous relationship for five years, and we both have tested HIV negative. How can we infect someone with something we don't have? Yet, while this ban prohibits us and others like us from donating blood, do those in favor of it feel more comfortable taking blood from a hetero[sexual] donor who has multiple sex partners without condoms and shares [injection] drugs? —**Peter, Detroit**

> By now everybody should know that sexual orientation is not the only vector from which "tainted" blood can come—especially the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention], HHS [Health and Human Services] and the [American] Red Cross. To continue to selectively treat MSM as suspect, requiring "further study," is yet another way to continue discriminating and giving fodder to the extremists that [believe] we are all disease carriers.
> —**Dave Martin, Austin, Texas**

> I think that the FDA should lift this ban, but still ask the same questions. Those in high-risk groups [such as MSM and others] should have their blood tested at least twice for HIV. If the person is found [to be] HIV positive, then [he or she should] be notified and [should] not be able to donate again.

—**Michael, Haslett, Michigan**

Unfortunately, I believe that this ban needs to be enforced considering that there are people who are [HIV] positive and don't know it—or maybe do not care that they would infect others by giving tainted blood. We have to be vigilant about HIV. I [was] a member of the Gallon Club, but once I found out my status I never tried to give again. I can only hope that the last time I gave I was not positive. It was a long time between my last giving and finding that I am positive. Just prudent to have the ban.
—**Samuel Croft, Washington, DC**

Isn't it easier and "cleaner" to simply require [every] blood donor to be HIV-free? Sexual orientation is a silly barrier. It is blood-borne infection that ought to bar donation, nothing else.
—**Rick, California**

Editor's Note: Even though all donated blood in the United States is tested for HIV, hepatitis B and C, syphilis and other infectious diseases, the FDA and the American Red Cross have warned against donating blood as a way of getting tested. Always get tested before you donate.

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