Reevaluate the FDA Gay Blood Ban

A gay California mayor wants to stop discrimination against gay men who want to donate blood.

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There was a time not too long ago where as mayor, I could officiate a wedding, but could not get married myself. I recall a situation in which the Boy Scouts came to visit a city council meeting in order to earn their merit badge and after the meeting, a boy asked me, “Were you also a Boy Scout—is that how you became mayor?” And most recently, I hosted a blood drive on city property, but was banned from donating blood myself.

As the mayor of Campbell, providing for the welfare of the general public is a top priority. As a gay man, however, I am conflicted in my advocacy for blood drives. Under current U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) guidelines, a man who has sex with another man is deferred for life from donating blood. The ban was imposed in 1983 when there were no reliable tests for screening blood for HIV/AIDS. It was also made during a time of mass medical confusion and cultural homophobia associated with HIV/AIDS. The current FDA ban is wildly outdated and perpetuates unfair labels against gay and bisexual men that live on through decades of discrimination.

Advances in technology and the understanding of HIV/AIDS have come a long way. The fact of the matter is that blood donations are safest and most effective when using rational, scientifically-based deferral periods that are applied fairly and consistently among blood donors who engage in similar risk activities. These screening strategies provide an inclusive, internationally recognized means for keeping blood supplies safe.

In fact, the American Medical Association and the American Red Cross are both in support of a reevaluation of the lifetime ban of gay men from donating blood. And most recently, over 82 Democratic and Republican lawmakers in the U.S. House and U.S. Senate have asked for the reevaluation.

We are behind in our policies in comparison with other countries. Both Canada and Britain in recent years have lifted their lifetime ban restrictions. Regardless, blood donations save lives, and although I take issue with the FDA’s policy, the communal need for an adequate and safe blood supply cannot be ignored. To prevent a blood drive on the grounds of public policy would be to place the citizens of Campbell and my community in danger. Ultimately, public policy can be solved over time, while an unpredictable act of nature can warrant an immediate need for a blood

supply.

Although I support blood drives, I will always stay committed to the fight for the rights of all people. Members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community simply want to be in recognized and committed loving relationships, be able to defend our country in the armed forces to fight for the freedoms that we value, be part of an invaluable institution that gives young boys the skill sets to become contributing members of our society and finally, to be able to sacrifice of themselves and give blood to save another's life. I firmly believe that the lifetime prohibition on gay and bisexual blood donors will one day exist as a relic of historical discrimination and that there will be a future in which we cherish lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people as equal members of society.

To sign a petition, click here.

Evan Low is mayor of Campbell, California. This article was originally published on Change.org.

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