U.K. to Relax Rules Banning Blood Donations From Gay and Bi Men

Plus, advocates in Canada want health officials there to also allow more gay and bi men to donate blood.

December 22, 2020 By Trent Straube

Many more gay and bisexual men will be able to donate blood in the United Kingdom thanks to updated policies set to be instituted next summer, reports the BBC. The new rules allow men who have sex with men to donate blood if they've been in a long-term monogamous relationship for at least three months before donating blood.

To be an eligible donor, the men must also not be taking pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), the daily tablets that prevent someone from becoming HIV positive, or postexposure prophylaxis (PEP), which is taken for 28 days following a possible exposure to HIV to prevent infection. In addition, they must not have a known exposure to a sexually transmitted infection (STI), according to the National Health Service's Blood and Transplant service.

Under the older guidelines, gay and bi men had to be celibate for three months in order to donate blood.

The updated rules apply the same criteria to everyone who donates blood, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, meaning that all sexually active donors must have been in a monogamous relationship at least three months before donating blood. The U.K. government describes the new policy as a "more individualized risk-based approach" to donor criteria.

Meanwhile, advocates in Canada are pressuring leaders to relax its blood ban policies. Currently, men who have sex with men are not allowed to donate blood if they've had sex within the past year. The same applies to women who have had sex with a gay or bi man in the past year.

As Vice reports, internal documents from Health Canada note that men who have sex with men are more likely to be aware of their HIV diagnosis than other at-risk groups and that officials haven't properly considered basing their screening criteria on sexual activity rather than gender and sexual orientation.

Canada, like the United States and many other countries, has faced a shortage of blood products because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This dire situation has forced many nations to finally

reevaluate their blood donation policies regarding gay and bisexual men, many of which were enacted in the 1980s during the height of the AIDS epidemic, when less was known about transmission and the detection of HIV in the blood supply.

In fact, last spring, the United States updated its policy to allow men who have sex with men to donate blood and plasma if they've abstained from sex for three months, instead of a year. For more about that, see "FDA Eases Its Ban on Blood Donations From Gay and Bi Men." In a related post, POZ blogger Shawn Decker, who has hemophilia and who contracted HIV in the '80s through tainted blood, wrote that "This Bleeder Supports an End to the Blood Ban."

Andy Cohen says he was not allowed to donate plasma because of discriminatory laws.YouTube/Watch What Happens Live With Andy Cohen

Many advocates say the three-month abstinence requirement remains discriminatory and counterproductive. Of note, the growing need for blood products includes the antibody-rich plasma of people who have recovered from COVID-19.

Earlier this year, Sabri Ben-Achour, a gay New Yorker who is HIV negative wanted to donate plasma for vital coronavirus research but was turned down because he had not abstained from sex for 12 months (the requirement at the time) and because he was taking Truvada as PrEP. For more details, see "Doctors Can't use COVID-19 Antibodies From Gay Men or Anyone Taking PrEP." In a similar situation, TV celebrity Andy Cohen was unable to donate his plasma to help people with COVID-19 because of the outdated policy. For more, read "His Blood Is Boiling."

Did you know that blood is one of six bodily fluids that can transmit HIV? The others are semen, pre-cum, rectal fluids, vaginal fluids and breast milk. The POZ HIV/AIDS Basics offers much more info, especially the section on HIV Transmission and Risk.

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