This Bleeder Supports an End to the Blood Ban

April 2, 2020 By Shawn Decker

The FDA has eased it's restrictions on gay men with regard to blood donations, in light of shortages due to COVID-19 and the advocacy of GLAAD. Instead of a period of twelve months abstinence, it is now three months...

In the 1980s, as AIDS decimated the gay community and the bleeding disorders community, both camps responded to the horrors in their midst by organizing and fighting back. The gay community started ACT UP, and rallied around the cause of government acknowledgement and accountability, while the hemophilia community invested and revealed the deadly practices of blood companies and how they collected donations from high-risk populations, such as homeless people and prisoners. Both groups (and gay men as well) were known to be at high-risk for hepatitis B, which was an early canary in the coalmine for HIV infection.

I was diagnosed at age 11, in 1987. How my infection was explained to me, and this is understandable, was that it was an accident and that the virus was in the product that we used to stop a bleed. My mom didn't want me to feel like any more of a victim than I already did, and being angry at the blood industry wouldn't have done much for my waning quality of life at the time., and would have probably made beating Metroid a tougher task than it already was...

Blew my mind when your character takes off the helmet to reveal that you were a female the whole time.

Badass.

But I digress.

I didn't really get educated about the grim reality of a crisis that was being willfully overlooked by people in positions of power until I was 18. I'm a mild bleeder, but one night I had a ghastly nosebleed that required a treatment, my first in probably two years or so. After my HIV diagnosis in 1987, I was tested for hepatitis C- which always came back positive. But, after this one isolated treatment in 1994, I had a surprise waiting for me a couple of months later when I had labs done: I'd contracted hepatitis C. This was years after the blood products had been deemed "safe". Even now, in documentaries, I'll see someone say, "Since 1990" or "since 1992" the blood industry has kept products safe.

I just roll my eyes. Experiencing that at 18 necessitated an adult conversation with my parents, and that's how I learned the darker side of my HIV infection, and that it could have been prevented. My disappointment wasn't in who was donating blood, it was in the system for knowing what the risks were but instead choosing to place profits over safety. Oh, and when the FDA did restrict blood companies from selling supplies that had already been produced but fell within a reasonable range of risk?

The blood companies sold that off overseas. Thus spreading HIV and hepatitis C worldwide.

So yeah, I'm not good at anger anyway, but any that I do have certainly doesn't rest on the shoulders of someone who was donating blood to make a little extra money during financial hardship.

As for the current situation with the easing of restrictions: I'm all for this step forward. I've always thought that who can and can't give blood should be based on risk factors, and not sexual orientation. Gwenn, my two-decades-long partner, is unable to donate blood because she is with me. Even though she is at no risk of contracting HIV from me due to my decades-long undetectable viral load (a credit to the efficacy of my continued adherence to HIV medications). She could give me blue balls for two years, and they still would turn her away if she went to donate blood.

I know there are so many people out there who want to help out by donating blood, but they can not due to antiquated restrictions. And that's what makes me angry.

Science over stigma, folks.

Let's do this.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

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