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Gay Men and Blood Donations – Discrimination or Responsible Practice?

A recent case against the Australian Red Cross Blood Service (ARCBS) alleges discrimination against gay men. This case has come about in response to the Blood Service's policy of requiring that people not give blood for a period of 12 months if they have:

- had a tattoo
- had a blood transfusion
- had any piercing (except ear piercing with a disposable needle)
- have been in prison or lock up
- had male to male sex
- had sex with a prostitute
- had a partner with hepatitis B or C

There is no blanket ban on gay men donating blood. Exclusions generally relate to high risk activities rather than 'identities' or groups of people. Male-to-male sex is the way HIV is most often transmitted in Australia and men who have had sex with men are the group most likely to have HIV. In inner Sydney, between 10 and 15% of men who have sex with men are HIV positive, less in other capital cities and regional areas. Less than 1% of heterosexuals in Australia have HIV.*

Most blood services in the developed world maintain a similar or more stringent policy. Recent research in the UK (which has similar HIV prevalence among men who have sex with men) indicated that removing their 12 month exclusion period would make it 60% more likely that HIV would enter the blood supply. **

It is vital for all of us that the blood supply remains safe from contamination from any blood born diseases including HIV, Hepatitis B and C, lupus and others. More than 80% of Australians receive blood at some stage in their lifetime.

The Blood Service's policies are based on current technology and practical considerations for testing. HIV tests with which most people are familiar, actually test for HIV antibodies (the immune's system's response to infection). These tests cannot detect HIV infection where antibodies have not yet

developed. In rare cases the development of antibodies can take up to 6 months after HIV infection.

The Blood Service runs tests by combining blood from 20 – 25 donors. If a positive result is found, a test of each individual donation in that batch identifies the positive sample. This form of testing is only effective because the exclusion of people who have engaged in high risk activities means that positive results are rare. Removing the 12 month exclusion criteria for any of the high risk activities would greatly increase the risk of blood borne diseases entering the blood supply. This would mean all 1 million annual donations would need to be individually tested. The costs would be enormous (some 25 times greater) and the time required for testing would mean that blood and blood products could not be supplied as quickly as needed.

On the basis of the epidemiology and the current limitations of testing technologies, the AIDS Council of NSW (ACON), the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (AFAO) and The Australasian Society for HIV Medicine (ASHM) support the Australian Red Cross Blood Service 12 month deferral period for blood donations from men who have had sex with men and other groups at higher risk of HIV transmission.

* National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research

** K.Soldan & K Sinka published in Vox Sanguinis 2003