MSM blood donor restriction an outdated constraint

Canadian Blood Services (CBS) are experiencing their worst blood shortage since 2008. They’re desperate for donors, of essentially, all shapes and sizes unless, you’re a male who’s had sex with another male (an activity abbreviated MSM) in the last five years.

Most of us recognize that this restriction is largely, if not completely, bogus. But we must give due credit: in 2013, CBS reduced what was once a lifetime deferral period to the current rate of five years, though this still isn’t a total removal of the discriminatory restriction. Let’s not be too hasty in placing all the blame on CBS; instead of a tyrannical bureaucracy branding their high-and-mighty pseudo-morals, these restrictions are more likely reflective of the current societal attitude towards homossexuality. CBS first installed its lifetime ban on men who have engaged in MSM in 1989, at a time when HIV/AIDS was just emerging as a more relevant topic of discussion in health care, but was still pathetically misunderstood. Nowadays, with highly sophisticated and developed screening at clinics and techniques for testing blood, this restriction is almost pathetically irrelevant.

The strange thing is that, based on their own Surveillance Report, CBS may be fully aware of the absurdity of their policy. They report that the main risk factor for HIV is having multiple sexual partners, not homosexuality itself. Moreover, they report that the risk of a transmission transmission is around one in eight million. Meanwhile, countries that have abolished the ban entirely have seen no changes in transmission rates. Maintaining this ban is questionable, with the data from this report showing that the evidence behind such a ban is so weak.

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This discriminatory policy might reflect less on the organization itself, and more on our overall society. There are still individuals living with the effects of an HIV/HEV infection from a transfusion in the late 1970s and 1980s, before effective screening and testing was available, which would unpleasantly colour their perceived notions of homosexual donors. Most University of Alberta students find themselves in a safe, liberal bubble of accepting attitudes, which could make them blissfully ignorant of the fact that there are still many people who harbour prejudices against gender minorities.

It’s clear that this restriction CBS places on potential blood donors isn’t founded on logic or science. What’s less clear, however, is who to blame. Some might say CBS holds all the responsibility, but let’s not forget that they need Health Canada’s approval for proposed policy changes. Instead, if everyone was educated and accepting not only of the LGBTQ+ community, but of safe sex practices and STI transmission, this ban probably wouldn’t exist in the first place. All the hard science needed to refine it is already out there, after all. Perhaps CBS is simply afraid of the societal backlash that may ensue from the lifting of the ban altogether.

It’s hard to not to be disheartened by restrictions based on long-held prejudices like this one imposed by CBS. But instead of completely lambasting well-meaning, life-saving organizations, we should use situations like this to improve our own awareness and efforts at attaining social equality.

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Love of God

We can argue that the existence of pain and suffering and of evil, suggests that God does not exist, but we cannot deny that we each have a conscience which tells good from bad. If then we are interested in understanding pain and suffering or what evil means, we should pay more attention to the choices we make. Our thoughts, what we do and what we fail to do, all matter. Choices affect not only our lives but the lives of others. With a closer scrutiny we may not be entirely satisfied with who we are and we may desire transformation to a person we can be proud of. One way to start is by repeating the following words:

"God if you exist, come into my heart and clean it. Teach me to love you and to love my neighbor as myself. I am sorry for the bad things I have done and the bad thoughts I have had about others, please forgive me and please help those that my actions and my words have brought pain to. I promise to pay attention to what I do, minute by minute, hour by hour."

If we are serious about a change of direction, then we should be prepared to set aside time daily to pray and we need to put our faith into action.

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

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