

Bad Blood: Gay Men Not Allowed to Give Blood

Contributed by Rob Drummer
Friday, 07 April 2006
Last Updated Sunday, 21 June 2009

You may or may not be aware that as a gay man you are unable to donate blood in America, the United Kingdom and in fact most Western countries; with the exception of parts of Spain and Switzerland. However, perhaps you have received a leaflet imploring you to donate your blood and ease the global shortage in blood supplies? You may also have seriously considered going along to the next local blood drive and feeling part of society by gladly donating? Unfortunately though for all gay men who have had sex with another man since 1977 they are banned from donating blood for the entirety of their life.

The UK Blood Transfusion and Tissue Transplantation Service publishes the guidelines for blood donation on their website and advocates their use of selection criteria to secure the safety of the national blood supply. In their efforts to minimise the risk of infecting receivers of donated blood with blood borne viruses they ban all gay men from donating blood.

'It is specific behaviours, rather than being gay, which places gay men at increased risk of HIV infection. Safer sex will keep most gay men free from infection, however research shows that allowing gay men as a group to donate blood would increase the risk of HIV infected blood entering the blood supply.'

It is not hard to view the guidelines above with contempt, especially as they represent a generalisation of gay sexual behaviours. The legislation seems based on historic attitudes in existence since the branding of Aids as the "gay virus" in the 1980's. Figures show that Aids is an increasing concern amongst heterosexual couples and it should no longer be perceived as a matter that solely affects gay individuals. The very fact that the ban is considered justifiable globally simply confirms the widespread injustice and prejudice still in existence surrounding homosexuality. However, if we are ever to achieve the goal of tolerance and respect in society we must question the existence of such an intolerant and uneducated perspective on homosexuality. Most shocking of all is the assumption that heterosexual individuals are lower risk in infecting blood. For example, a straight man that sleeps with a different woman every night and does not use a condom would never be disqualified from donating blood. However, a gay man in a monogamous relationship practicing safe sex for the past thirty years would never be allowed to donate. This absurd assumption that to be gay means to be sexually irresponsible is deeply concerning especially for an impressionable gay youth. Are we not constantly reminded that to practice safe sex dramatically removes the risk of catching Aids and other Sexually Transmitted Infections? If safe sex is so glorified then why is it not acceptable as a gay man to defend your right to donate blood? Essentially we are advised to wear a condom when engaging in sexual activity, so as long as gay men follow this rule why is it not enough to convince the National Blood Transfusion Service of our donation eligibility? To be young and gay can be daunting, especially as widespread social injustice promotes the perspective that there is something wrong with being gay. Forever seeking social acceptance, gay youths should never be made to feel that they are denied equal rights from their straight contemporaries. To be denied the right to donate blood promotes the attitude that to be gay is to be a threat to society. The national blood service do of course need to exercise care when transfusing blood, and ensure that all donated blood is rigorously tested for any blood borne viruses. Surely then this serves as a safety net for detecting "threatening" blood? Surely, if a gay man were to be HIV negative then his blood would be acceptable for transfusion? Unfortunately this is not the case as it is believe that to allow gay men to donate at all regardless of blood testing would dramatically increase the threat of infection spreading. Essentially then, this obvious discrimination against gay men, regardless of their HIV status is an example of how although small advances are made in promoting acceptance of homosexuality, wider society continues to practice its prejudices. The regulations are not going unchallenged though and there have been many demonstrations over recent months on both sides of the Atlantic. The LGBT Society of Edinburgh University held a protest outside a blood drive at the beginning of March. Tom French, the society's campaign leader stated "HIV/AIDS is not a gay disease. Many gay people live in monogamous relationships and are at no greater risk of sexually transmitted infections than anyone else". The issue of "bad blood" is being challenged from younger members of the gay community and they are determined not to let the regulations exist without dispute. There is however, some progress in America, with the American Red Cross rethinking its guidelines banning gay men from donating. In a recent article, a spokesperson said "providing the person has not had sex for a year, gay blood donations should be accepted." The Red Cross is responsible for collecting 45% of America's blood donation supply, and finds it hard to keep up with this demand. The organisation made \$2.1 billion from selling blood and blood products in the US last year, which it spends on its charitable and aid relief missions. Perhaps then there is a financial motive for increasing the potential for blood donations, with gay men seen as an opportunity to fill the gap between supply and demand? To be gay is not to be socially threatening, and we should not allow ourselves to be branded as transmitters of disease, our blood is not bad and we should not accept such generalisations of minority gay sexual behaviours.