



Welsh Blood Service

Position Statement – November 2011

SaBTO Review of blood donor selection criteria related to sexual behaviour

The permanent exclusion of men who have sex with men (MSM) from donating blood will change to a 12 month fixed period deferral from the latest relevant sexual contact following an evidence based review by the Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs (SaBTO).

SaBTO is responsible for regularly reviewing the major criteria related to sexual behaviour and for recommendations to the four UK Health Ministers on blood donation policy.

SaBTO has recently completed a review of blood donor selection criteria related to sexual behaviour. Following this review, and based on recommendations from SaBTO, Health Ministers in Wales, England and Scotland have announced that the blood donor selection criteria for men who have sex with men will change.

Previously, men who have ever had oral or anal sex with another man, even if a condom was used, were permanently excluded from blood donation in the UK. The change means that from 7th November 2011 only men who have had anal or oral sex with another man in the past 12 months, with or without a condom, will be asked not to donate blood. Men whose last sexual contact with another man was more than 12 months ago will be able to donate (subject to meeting the other donor selection criteria).

The Welsh Blood Service will implement the change at blood donation sessions on 7th November 2011. The English and Scottish Blood Services will also implement the change on 7th November 2011. Until 7 November 2011 the existing permanent exclusion will continue to apply across the UK.

At blood donation sessions, all donors are asked to complete a questionnaire called the donor health check, to assess whether they meet the donor selection criteria. This is to ensure that the supply of blood to hospitals is as safe as possible.

We welcome the review and the resulting change as it is supported by the most up to date scientific evidence. SaBTO's review concluded that the safety of the blood supply would not be adversely affected by the change and we would like to reassure patients receiving transfusions that the blood supply is as safe as it reasonably can be and amongst the safest in the world. The Welsh Blood Service (WBS) has a clear responsibility to minimise the risk of any blood transfusion transmitting an infection. Blood donor selection criteria and a wide range of other blood safety measures including stringent testing mean there has been no documented transmission of a blood-borne virus in the UK since 2005, with no HIV transmission since 2002.

Clearly any transmission would be one too many and the purpose of blood donor selection criteria, alongside other safety measures, is to minimise any potential harm to recipients of blood donations. All groups that are excluded or deferred from blood donation have been assessed as being at a statistically increased risk of carrying blood-borne viruses. For more information on all blood donor selection criteria and other blood safety measures click here:

<http://www.transfusionguidelines.org.uk/index.asp?Publication=DG>

The change brings the criteria for men who have sex with men in line with those for the majority of other groups that are deferred from blood donation for 12 months due to the risks of infection associated with sexual behaviours. We appreciate that it can be disappointing for anyone who wishes to donate blood but is not able to meet the donor selection criteria. The criteria are based on complex assessments of risk and must by their nature be based on evidence and statistics that are recorded at a population level. Such an approach results in assessments of certain groups as being at a higher risk than others of carrying blood borne infections, and can make individuals that are deferred from donation feel they are being placed into a 'category' despite their own sexual behaviour and risk-taking.

Although some would prefer a system that assesses every individual's behaviour and level of risk rather than applying deferrals to groups, SaBTO's review concluded that there is insufficient evidence available to be able to determine the impact on blood safety of such a system. It is also not certain that all people could objectively assess their own level of risk. Based on published data, the review also concluded that the introduction of extensive donor questions regarding sexual behaviour could lead to a loss of existing donors who may find the process intrusive. The Blood Services are therefore required to follow deferral rules that estimate the statistical risk of certain groups based on behaviour. We are sorry for any inadvertent offence this may cause.

Blood donation works on the principles of kindness and mutual trust and we ask all potential and existing donors to adhere to the blood donor selection criteria by providing completely honest answers to all the questions asked, both for the protection of their own health and that of others. Donor selection criteria that are proportionate and based purely on evidence are necessary to help ensure that donors comply with the health check process. Compliance with all donor selection criteria is crucial in order to ensure the continued safety of the blood supply. Anyone may require a blood transfusion in the future and it is in the best interests of us all to ensure that we strive to maintain blood safety.