

Donors: New exclusion principle adopted

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Acknowledging that lesbians are low-risk donors, the Ministry of Health revised the regulation introduced in 2001 that prohibited all homosexuals from giving blood.

However, the regulation still prohibits gay men from donating blood, along with drug addicts and people with multiple sexual partners.

"The revised regulation focuses on actions of donors that might compromise blood safety instead of highlighting certain groups of people," said Gao Dongying, deputy director of the Beijing Red Cross Blood Center.

Risky behavior

The Ministry of Health says the regulations covering blood donations are aimed at protecting recipients of transfusions from exposure to potentially infected blood and blood products. Its data indicate that, as a group, men who have sex with men are more likely to get HIV and other contagious diseases than individuals in other categories.

According to the ministry, about 3 percent of Chinese men who have sex with other men are HIV positive, a percentage that is far higher than the average for the population as a whole. It estimates that in 2011 there were 48,000 new cases in the country and the virus had been sexually transmitted in 81.6 percent of these. The proportion for the period between 1985 and 2005 was only 11.6 percent.

"Even if we are still prohibited from donating blood, the revised requirement is better as it focuses on risky behavior rather than discriminating against a certain group of people," said Jiang Hui, who works at the Aibai Culture and Education Center in Beijing, which provides support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.

"I am happy to see that lesbians can donate blood legally in the future. It means a lot to homosexuals and the country," said Karen. "But I will still not admit my sexual orientation even now lesbians are allowed to donate blood."

In China, all potential blood donors have to fill in health declaration forms in which they are supposed to reveal their sexual orientation.

"John" from Hebei province, is a 27-year-old English teacher in a vocational school in Beijing. He has donated blood six times altogether since 2006 without revealing he was gay.

"I'm sure about my health, and my blood was tested and accepted," he said.

Usually within a week of giving blood, donors get a message telling them if their donated blood passed health checks, including HIV screening.

"There are still many people who are prejudiced against gays. We don't want to reveal our sexual orientation," he said.

However, under the new amendment, the forms will inform donors that they are liable for any damages arising from problems with their blood if they knowingly give false information.

Safety first

Yang Wenling, director of the Tianjin Blood Center, said that doctors at the center are aware that not all the information given them on the forms is reliable. If they think someone might be a high-risk donor, they will try to emphasize the importance of blood safety and ask about the donor's medical history.

"It is difficult to ask information of donors who are suspected of being gay. It needs skills to get their real information while preventing them from being hurt," Yang said.

In most cases, doctors will emphasize to donors the importance of blood safety, and if the donor doesn't do regular health checks they will suggest they doing a free one in the local diseases control center.

Yang said that if the donors were suspected of belonging to high-risk groups, their blood bag would be marked.

"I think blood safety is more important than the shortage of blood. We want to encourage more people to donate blood, but we have to confirm that all the blood is safe," she said.

Short of blood

China is among 70 countries worldwide with a blood donation rate of less than 1 percent of the

1
percent
of China's population donate blood

4
percent
of the population in high-income countries donate blood

11.8
million
number of unpaid donors in China last year, up from 6.75 million in 2006

3
percent
of gay men HIV positive, according to the Ministry of Health



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"KAREN"
A LESBIAN IN BEIJING
WHO HAS DONATED BLOOD
SIX TIMES SINCE 2006

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YANG WENLING
DIRECTOR OF THE
TIANJIN BLOOD CENTER



population, a rate the World Health Organization considers to be the minimum requirement.

The average in high-income countries is about 4 percent. The number of unpaid donors in China rose from 6.75 million in 2006 to 11.8 million last year, and the volume of blood increased by more than 30 percent.

But the demand is still greater than the supply.

China's first Law on Blood Donation was enacted in 1998, encouraging all citizens between the ages of 18 and 55 to donate blood.

The latest revision has extended the maximum age of donors to 60.

Other countries trying to increase their supplies of donated blood have relaxed their restrictions on gay men donating blood.

In the United Kingdom, men who had sex with men were banned from donating blood until 2011, when the blood donor health requirement was revised so that men who hadn't had sex with men in the previous 12 months could donate blood. Australia, has a similar "safety period" of 24 months.

"It will take time for China to decide whether such a requirement can be used," said Gao from the Beijing Red Cross Blood Center.

"But blood safety is not only about donors it's also about users. Even if there is only one bag of unsafe blood, it will cause a big tragedy. Blood can save lives, but dangerous blood can also cost lives. So we cannot take a risk."

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Tang Yue and Zhang Yuchen contributed to the story.



ZHANG BEI / FOR CHINA DAILY

Collecting blood at a blood donation center in Xidan in downtown Beijing in March. Acknowledging that lesbians are low-risk donors, the Ministry of Health revised the regulation introduced in 2001 that prohibited all homosexuals from giving blood.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q: Why doesn't the amended regulation allow blood donations from men who have sex with men?

A: The history of male-to-male sex is associated with an increased risk of the presence and transmission of certain diseases, including HIV. The regulations are aimed at protecting recipients of transfusions from an increased risk of exposure to potentially infected blood and blood products.

Q: What about men who have had a low number of partners, practice safe sex, or who are currently in a monogamous relationship?

A: A low number of partners is believed to decrease the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases. However, the donor eligibility questionnaire relies on the potential donor answering it honestly.

Q: Why are heterosexuals who have had multiple partners allowed to donate blood despite the increased risk of the transmission of HIV and hepatitis?

A: Current scientific data from the department of health indicate that, as a group, men who have sex with men are have a higher chance of transmitting HIV and other diseases than individuals in other categories.

Q: Isn't the HIV test accurate enough to identify all HIV-positive blood donors?

A: The HIV test currently in use is highly accurate, but still cannot detect HIV with 100 percent accuracy. A "window" of a few weeks exists directly after infection during which the current HIV tests cannot detect all infections. Therefore, blood donors are not only tested but are also asked questions about their behavior that might increase their chances of contracting HIV.

YANG WANLI

Shorter intervals between donations

By YANG WANLI
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The Ministry of Health's latest amendments to the Whole Blood and Component Donor Selection Requirement are in response to a shortage of donated blood, which continues to be a problem in China despite the government's efforts to raise people's awareness about the need for blood.

Even though China's Blood Donation Law introduced in 1998 encouraged all citizens between the age of 18 and 55 to donate blood, only 84 out of 10,000 people donate blood in China.

This is far below the 454 people out of every 10,000 people who donate blood in high-income countries.

Among the nine changes introduced, the new requirement increases the maximum age for donors by five years to 60. Although potential donors over 55 years old must be in good health and have made at least three blood donations in the past without any side effects.

In most foreign countries, people up to the age of 65 are allowed to make whole blood donations. In Canada, someone who has donated blood before can continue to donate up until 70 years of age.

It was reported that more than 10 senior residents over the age of 55 came to donate blood in Urumqi, the capital of Northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, during the first week after the changes came into effect.

However, according to the ministry, more than 80 percent of donors in China are between 20 to 45 years old and raising the maximum age limit is unlikely to significantly increase the amount of blood donated. So the intervals between an individual's donations have also been adjusted.

The platelet collection interval has been reduced from four to two months, with the total number of donations limited to no more than 24 within a year, while the interval between a whole blood donation and platelet donation is now a minimum of three months.