

UK lifts lifetime ban on gay men giving blood

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The ban on gay men donating blood in Great Britain is to be lifted on 7 November 2011, after new evidence, including research in the *BMJ*, indicated that this would not affect the safety for recipients.

Men who abstain from anal and oral sex with another man for at least one year will be eligible if they meet the other criteria for selecting donors, the Department of Health announced on 8 September. This 12 month “deferral” applies whether or not condoms were used.

“Donor selection rules are based on good evidence to maintain their credibility with donors, and this change . . . is proportionate to the current risk,” said Lorna Williamson, medical and research director of NHS Blood and Transplant, which manages donations in England and north Wales. Our priority is “to provide a safe and sufficient supply of blood for patients,” she said.

The independent Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues, and Organs (SaBTO), which advises UK government and health departments and comprises experts, patients’ representatives, and other stakeholders, recommended the change. Deirdre Kelly, professor of paediatric hepatology at the University of Birmingham, who led SaBTO’s review, said that new evidence had become available since the last review, in 2006.

The *BMJ* research explored compliance with the lifetime ban among men who had ever had penetrative oral or anal sex with another man (MSM) (*BMJ* 2011;343:d5604, doi:10.1136/bmj.d5604). SaBTO’s review also considered epidemiological data, advances in blood testing, and monitoring from countries with shorter deferrals for MSM.

Modelling showed no discernible change in risk with a deferral of either five years or one year provided that MSM donors are honest.

Currently, MSM, commercial sex workers, injecting drug users, and others are permanently banned from donating blood in the UK. People who have had sex with a sex worker or drug injector are deferred for one year. The SaBTO review also considered the ban on sex workers but found insufficient evidence for change.

The UK has been under pressure to review the ban on MSM after other countries shortened deferrals—for example, Sweden to one year and New Zealand to five years.

Sir Nick Partridge, chief executive of the HIV charity the Terrence Higgins Trust, said, “We will continue to campaign to improve gay men’s sexual health to a level where the regulations can be the same for all, regardless of sexuality.”

Monogamous long term gay partners will remain ineligible if sexually active. Sir Nick explained that this is because gay men in general have a higher prevalence of HIV and individual assessments of risk would be too complex and costly.

The experts were unable to say how many more eligible blood donors the new rule would allow. A 2008 nationwide survey of openly gay men found that less than 7% had not had sex in the past year (www.sigmaresearch.org.uk/files/report2010b.pdf). The change will mean, though, that the thousands of men who experiment briefly with gay sex will later be able to donate blood.

The change in policy scheduled for 7 November has not been announced in Northern Ireland.

In the 1980s, with the emergence of the HIV epidemic, blood services worldwide introduced deferrals for broad groups with higher prevalence of blood borne diseases, such as HIV and hepatitis B, than the general population. UK blood services screen all donated blood, but “window periods” immediately after infection mean this might not identify people who have recently become infected.

In their *BMJ* study, Kaye Wellings, professor of sexual and reproductive health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and coauthors found that 10.6% (50/474) of MSM had ever given blood ineligibly. Ineligible donation was much less likely among men who had had penetrative sex in the past year.

SaBTO’s review is at www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_129796.

bmj.com/archive Feature: Bad blood: gay men and blood donation (*BMJ* 2009;338:b779, doi:10.1136/bmj.b779); Head to Head: Should men who have ever had sex with men be allowed to give blood? (*BMJ* 2009;338:b311 and b318, doi:10.1136/bmj.b311 and doi:10.1136/bmj.b318)

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