
Lift The Lifetime Ban On Blood Donation By Gay Men

Since 1983 Canada and many other countries implemented the indefinite deferral of blood donation by men who had sex with men. This was implemented based on the information regarding HIV/AIDS at that time. It was known that the disease was a blood-borne disease and was most prevalent among homosexual men. To be safe, the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention denied the ability to donate blood to any man that had been sexually active with other men since 1977. This would eliminate the risk of receiving infected blood from a gay man because this date preceded the start of the epidemic. It was decided that women, in Canada, who have had sex with a man who has had sex with another man were able to donate blood one year after the sexual encounter. Why shouldn't this rule apply to males? I believe that gay men around the world should be allowed to donate blood after a certain period of abstinence or safe sex.

Creating an indefinite deferral seemed necessary in the early 1980's. The deadly disease had only just been discovered and the FDA feared the transmission through blood donation would be too common. Although discriminatory, the CDC and FDA supported their ideas with two clear benefits of the indefinite deferral. Those being: 1) no risk of accidental release of contaminated blood into the public and 2) prevention of transfusion of HIV-infected blood units (Wainberg, Shuldiner, Dahl, Gilmore 1323). The FDA reasons that if anyone completes the donor history questionnaire and is identified as "at increased risk" they too will be deferred. There's a two week deferral if you've recently received a vaccination, a 12 month deferral after getting a tattoo or piercing, but an indefinite deferral for being a sexually active gay man.

Countries such as Argentina, Australia, Japan, Hungary and Sweden have used their own discretion to reduce their deferrals to one year. A homosexual man must remain abstinent for one year to be able to donate blood. South Africa allows donation after six months of abstinence and New Zealand allows donations after 10 years. On May 22nd 2013 CTV News informed the nation that "Canada is lifting a nearly 30-year-old ban on gay men giving blood". The decision was made to allow a gay man to donate blood if they haven't had sex with another man in the five years prior to the donation. Spokesperson Mark Wainberg agrees this is "a step in the right direction". The vice-president of medical, scientific and research affairs at Canadian Blood Services, Devine, says this will finally allow men that have experimented when younger or were sexually assaulted or raped the chance to donate. This type of deferral is much less discriminatory and therefore gay male Canadians should consider donation if the standards apply to them. This is the type of deferral that I believe should be offered worldwide, if not any less. As stated in the CTV News article the benefit to men who have not had a sexual encounter with another man within the past five years are endless. This can apply to men who have been

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abused, experimented or men who choose to stay abstinent.

Although still banned in the United States, more and more news articles each day speak about the issues that gay American men have with the deferral. A campaign called the National Gay Blood Drive brought together 61 American cities on July 11 2014, the groups of people donated and protested to raise awareness about the ban. All gay men that attended brought one or more ally/proxy to donate for them. While there the men filled out the donor history questionnaire only to be denied. They sent their questionnaire along with letters describing their desire to donate blood to the FDA. They are hoping this will demonstrate to the FDA the amount of gay men who are interested in donating blood to help the many in need. An article in the Times Magazine explains that the American Medical Association (AMA) voted to end the ban. A spokesperson stated the ban is no longer based on sound science and the disease is much better understood at this time. The AMA knows the risks are still there, but is asking men to be deferred according to their individual risk, not their sexual orientation. I believe the AMA is making a valid point in suggesting this. It is discriminatory to deny a man the ability to donate based on his sexual orientation. Each individual who identifies themselves as homosexual should be given the chance to explain their personal risk of being infected with the blood-borne disease. Based on the information shared, assuming each person interested in blood donation is honest, that individuals risk can be determined.

In an article from NBC News, Zingman, an American doctor that is the director of the AIDS Center at Montefiore Medical Center states "Even what Canada did recently is questionable, but a step in the right direction... it's closer to reality than a lifetime ban, but still a long and conservative window." In my opinion, the move Canada made is not at all questionable. Although, long and probably conflicting for some sexually active gay men, I think the 5 year deferral is much more considerate for all homosexual men than the lifetime ban. The type of deferral that Canada has put in place in the past year and a half is the type of deferral I believe should be permitted worldwide. For countries that blood donation is extremely important, such as South Africa, the shorter deferral time is understandable. Every other country should allow a maximum of five years of abstinence or safe sex. The extra blood donations around the world by abstinent gay man will benefit many people in need, which is the most important factor of all.

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