

Shorter ban still unfair: critics

Canadian Blood Services grilled at Gay Men’s Health Summit

HIV
NATHANIEL CHRISTOPHER

HIV activists at Vancouver’s ninth annual Gay Men’s Health Summit challenged Canadian Blood Services’ (CBS) ongoing — albeit shortened — ban on gay men giving blood, Nov 7.

Health Canada’s new blood donation policy — which replaced its lifetime ban on men who have had sex with men since 1977 with a five-year deferral — took effect on July 22. Under the new policy, men who refrain from having sex with other men for five years are now eligible to donate blood.

The gay blood ban was implemented in the 1980s after the national blood supply was contaminated with hepatitis C and HIV, infecting more than 1,200 people with HIV and more than 25,000 with hepatitis C. The ban was enacted at a time when HIV testing was less reliable, but new tests can now detect the virus seven to 15 days after infection.

While the window period has shortened, it still presents a risk to the blood supply, says Don Lapierre, CBS’s manager of stakeholder relations.

“During that window period, if I were just infected today and I went to give blood tomorrow, then all of the recipients of my blood would then also become infected with HIV. But we would not know that because of the technology and the testing measures that are in place right now,” he told the summit.

However, Lapierre said, the five-year deferral drastically reduces risk of HIV infection to the blood supply.

“On a purely scientific level, we know that a one-year deferral would equally protect from risk,” he acknowledged. “But we have to move through this in sort of baby steps, if you will, in order to be able to be granted the right to be able to change the policy.”

Some audience members were unconvinced.

“There’s something about protecting the rest of the population from gay men,” said Len Tooley, who asked if there were any other populations who are excluded based on identity.

“We look for travel to areas where malaria may be occurring, for example,” replied Margaret Fearon, CBS’s executive director of medical microbiology.



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BLAIN BUTYNIIEC, GAY MEN’S HEALTH SUMMIT PARTICIPANT

Canadian Blood Services’ Don Lapierre (with left to right: Jennifer Breakspear, Margaret Fearon and Patrick Loftus) admits there isn’t much difference scientifically between a five-year and one-year deferral.

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“We ask about behavioural practices which may put folks at risk for HIV or hepatitis B. We ask whether folks have lived for specific periods of time in the United Kingdom during the variant CJD outbreak, because that may put them at risk for variant CJD.”

Jennifer Breakspear, executive director of Options for Sexual Health and co-chair of CBS’s working group on gay men giving blood, said the end goal is a gender-neutral, behaviour-based survey.

“The threat is not who you are and who you love; the threat is about how you perform an activity and does that activity threaten the activity of your blood,” she said. “That is where I hope we’re getting, though we weren’t being offered that as an option.”

Breakspear said that during the course of discussions she learned that it’s Health Canada — not CBS — preventing gay men from donating blood.

“We were told that the best they would accept or consider is a five-year ban, so I see this as incremental progress. And in fact when Health Canada came back accepting this submission they gave a number of conditions they put on Canadian Blood Services that you can do this but you need to do the following things while you are doing it. You need to collect all this data demonstrating the blood supply is still safe. You need to show us that

it brought more young people into your clinics.”

“Advocacy and activism needs to continue, and as it has been mentioned already and I’ll just restate it: Canadian Blood Services does not dictate this policy,” said Patrick Loftus, CBS’s medical services coordinator, urging audience members to contact Health Minister Rona Ambrose.

However, both Lapierre and Fearon confirmed that a directive to look at a five- to 10-year deferral came from the CBS board of directors; not Health Canada.

Blain Butyniec denounced the five-year deferral as “discrimination-light” and accused CBS of advocating for a fear-based policy rather than something rooted in science.

“I’m saying you have this discriminatory policy against gay men because of this fear of them all having HIV, and I’m saying that in Manitoba it’s actually only about 20 percent of new cases are from within the MSM community, so should you not be looking at barring heterosexuals from donating in Manitoba?” he asked the panellists. X

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