

# Defending the Canadian Red Cross

## Why this recent target of bad press deserves our praise

BY CHRIS BENJAMIN

Since the start of the Krever Commission on the tainted blood transfusions of the 1980s, the Canadian Red Cross has received a lot of bad press. This organization has been accused of covering up and passing the buck on its responsibility to the victims of tainted blood. Now the Red Cross has responded to public fears about the blood drive with a more stringent donor screening process.

The goal of screening donors is to avoid high risk groups, because transmissible viruses are sometimes not detectable in the current time frame (although a new HIV-1 antigen test has reduced this "window period" by one week, thereby reducing the odds of an HIV carrier giving blood by another 25%). The result of this screening, besides greatly reducing the odds of contracting a transmittable disease from a blood transfusion, has been backlash from the gay and lesbian community. Most recently, members of this community protested a blood drive at McGill University in Montreal on the basis of discriminatory practices by the Red Cross.

Let's get our facts straight here. First, the Red Cross has made an official policy of full disclosure to the Krever Commission, and invested a large portion of its limited resources into accommodating Justice Horrace Krever. According to Halifax Blood Services representative Ian Murray, the Red Cross wants as much as anyone to get to the bottom of the tainted blood transfusions of the 1980s.

Second, the blood donor

screening process is regulated by the federal Health Department and the United States Food and Drug Administration (USFDA). This duality of regulators is necessary because Canadian plasma is currently sent to the United States to be fractionated. These regulatory bodies make the rules; the Red Cross abides by them, and agrees with them.

So is the resulting screening process discriminatory? It does differentiate between high risk and low risk groups, in part based on recent sexual practices and experiences. However, research by the federal Health Department has demonstrated that the chances of homosexuals carrying HIV is higher than those of a heterosexual being infected by this virus, and the process is effective. Let's face it, saving lives and easing pain is more important than avoiding the disfavour of a group of people. And saving lives and easing pain is ultimately what the blood drive is all about.

Just ask Sandra Butcher, who wrote a thank you note to all blood donors for their gift to her. She wrote, "I am truly alive today thanks to people like you." After a life-saving bone marrow transplant, Ms. Butcher received over 200 blood transfusions which served to replenish her immune system and restore her strength and energy which were previously all but non-existing.

Those 200 transfusions are a small portion of the 36,000 carried out each year in Nova Scotia. Thousands more units of blood plasma are also needed to treat burn victims, hemophiliacs, and people suffering from hepatitis and other disorders. Due to

failed donations, 36,000 transfusions translates to a needed 43,000 registered donors, or roughly 900 each week. In Canada, 600,000 people are safely treated each year with blood products, or one each minute. The demand is great, but

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continued negative and one-sided press serves to increase public wariness of the blood drive, and reduces donations of this crucial substance.

The fact is, it is safer to give and to receive blood than ever before. No diseases can be contracted from giving blood because all materials used in the process are new, sterile, disposable, and used on only one donor. Donors' blood pressure, temperature, iron level, and pulse are all taken before the donation to ensure that risk to the donor is minimized. The odds of contracting HIV from a transfusion is one in 250,000 (.0004%), a dramatic decrease from 1985. The Red Cross has accomplished this improvement with the combination of state of

the art blood testing, donor health assessment by nurses and stringent donor screening. The result is that Canada's blood supply is regarded by international experts as one of the safest in the world. Safer in fact than if volunteers were paid (as they are in the United States) according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

In the past, mistakes with the blood bank were made, and tragedy resulted. The Red Cross hopes to discover the source of such errors, and has already done much to ensure that they are not repeated. This admirable organization, founded on the principles of humanitarianism and impartiality, has saved uncountable lives in our own country and abroad. These accomplishments must not be forgotten. The blood drive has clearly done more good than harm.

Every reader of this article will likely know someone who benefited in some way from the Red Cross. Someday it may be you who needs a transfusion. If that happens, you will be glad to know that the Red Cross is there to help, and has ensured in every possible way that the blood you receive brings you back to health, as it did for Sandra Butcher, and millions of others. Life and health are too precious for us to criticize an organization which does so much to preserve and maintain them.

There will be a blood donor clinic on Wednesday, April 23rd at Legion Hall, Lower Sackville, from 2-4 p.m. and 6-8 p.m. Alternatively, you can give blood at the Red Cross Centre, 1940 Gottingen Street, Halifax, at the following times: Monday and Tuesday, 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m.; Thursday, 12-7 p.m.; and Friday, 7:30-9:30 a.m.

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