

Crossing the Red Cross

There was something missing at the Red Cross Blood Donor clinic that was held this past Monday and Tuesday in the McInnes Room of the Dal SUB.

Sure, there were the usual army of white-coated nurses, the odd patio furniture-like cots, and the usual table full of sugary goodies. The entry nurses checked their ancient microfiche machines on one side of the room while others swabbed up the arms of donors.

All the proper procedures were followed to the letter.

What was missing was any objection to what those procedures are.

Missing were the protests that have had Red Cross blood donor clinics banned from other university campuses and have made them pack up in fear of protest from others.

What taints the whole altruistic process that sees faceless donors give to faceless recipients is one question, in one part of the Donor Health Assessment Questionnaire. If your answer to this question is yes, your blood will not be used. The samples will be tested for many different diseases like every other donation. And then your pint of blood will be thrown out.

The question is number fifteen.

"The following activities put you at risk for AIDS.

- if male, having sex with another male, even once
- receiving regular treatment with blood or blood products
- accepting money or drugs in exchange for sex
- being the sexual partner of someone who has taken part in any of the above activities or who has contracted AIDS or has tested positive for AIDS.

Since 1977, have you participated in any of the above activities?"

Many have demanded that the first part of question — dealing with gay male sex — be removed because it is homophobic.

The Red Cross asks donors screening questions because their

testing procedures are not one hundred per cent accurate. In fact, it's not physically possible to have any completely accurate testing procedure. The Blood Service wants to reduce the risks of AIDS-infected blood getting through into the blood supply. Fair enough.

Other questions ask about the sharing of needles and street drug use, an activity which increases your risk of contracting the virus which causes AIDS. Still more questions ask you about having sex with partners whose sexual background is not known to you and who may have participated in high-risk activities.

The Red Cross asks these questions, and must trust that those who answer them answer them correctly, and honestly. It asks some twice, even three times to ensure that if a behaviour isn't detected on one question, then it's detected on another.

I have trouble accepting that a gay male is undergoing a high-risk activity simply by having sex with his partner.

For an extreme example, if a gay male had been monogamous with his partner since before 1977 — before the AIDS virus is known to have hit North America — then he would be effectively a zero risk.

If a much younger gay male has practiced safe sex all his life, he too, would be effectively a zero risk.

Yet these men would not have their blood used under the current screening procedures.

It is true that gay men still make up the greatest share of the population of those infected with the AIDS virus. The number of heterosexuals infected is far below but rising steadily. The infection rate among intravenous drug users is increasing far more rapidly.

Shouldn't it make more sense to make unsafe sex simply sex with partners of questionable background instead of simply categorizing all gay male sex as unsafe sex?

The point might be made that the gay men could lie about the

riskiness of their past sexual practices. But a heterosexual man might do the same.

So why the distinction?

The Red Cross claim that they are simply protecting the public against blood donations from people who partake in high-risk activities. Safe sex between two men is not a high-risk activity.

There should be outrage about this question. It should be eliminated as it serves no purpose but to perpetuate the stereotype that AIDS is a disease that gay men get.

I don't believe, however, that people should stop donating blood to the Red Cross. It doesn't hurt the Red Cross, or the Federal Health Department's Bureau of Biologics who make up the screening criteria, if people don't donate. The people who are hurt are those who need the blood to survive.

What should happen is a continued, steady protest.

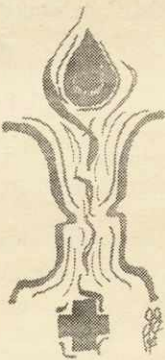
Tell every Red Cross employee when you give blood — if they will let you — that, while you will still donate, you are unhappy with the screening procedure. Call the Red Cross offices, or the Federal Health Department, and demand that the question be changed.

When you fill out the donor form, simply scratch out the homophobic question when you get to it. Refuse to answer yes or no. Tell the nurse that they would have no idea if you were lying anyway, and that the other questions, which you will answer, are more than enough to ensure that you are or are not part of a high-risk group.

The Red Cross is full of good intentions but they fail to see the damaging nature of their unnecessary, homophobic question.

It's up to the people who donate to force them to open their eyes.

TIM COVERT



letters

Presidential apology

As president of the Dalhousie Arts Society I would like to apologize for comments I made at a January 15, 1997 council meeting about the funding of a lecture by Canadian astronaut Dr. Roberta Bondar.

As it now appears, it seems that the meaning of my words or the language that I used, has been misinterpreted and has been conveyed as insult to women. However, the statement which I made, was not one of dishonour to women astronauts or space exploration. Rather, for no other reason, I was attempting to convey the sentiments of the Arts Society Executive and bring a debate on funding for Roberta Bondar to a close, at which point I said the offensive comment, "This issue of women in space is dead."

This reference was by no means meant to offend, harm or criticize the role that women have or play in space exploration. Rather it was to express that the Dalhousie Arts Society was unable to fund and support a Dalhousie Science Society project. This because of a cost to DAS which represents \$4000 and a hefty amount of our remaining budget for the year, the DAS executive could not foresee a pivotal role in bringing her to Dalhousie.

Therefore from our perspective funding such a project will tie the hands of DAS from being involved or sponsoring any other activities for the 96/97 school year. Since the overall cost for Dr. Bondar will be in excess of \$14,000, I feel that funding will therefore need to come from other sources. Consequently, the argument from which this comment was based on, was not the issue of women in space, but funding.

Unfortunately, I did make such a statement and in no short order do I expect those offended to forgive me.

So to those individuals or departments which were offended by my comments, I wish to relay a message to you of apology; I'm sorry for making such a statement and I apologize to every individual that took offense.

Steve Johnson
President

Dalhousie Arts Society

Review reaction

I just have to write in and complain about the review of the Smashie Pumpkins' new album by Greg MacFarlane in your January 16th issue. I'm sure Tim Covert and Mark Reynolds could see this one coming a mile away, but anyway...

I'm rather irked at the bigotry displayed in this review towards synthesizers. Since it was first used by German composers in the 1960s, the synthesizer has grown to be regarded as a mature and perfectly respectable member of the family of musical instruments used in modern music. Synthesizer is used in as many different ways as one can imagine, in as many different musical genres as one can imagine, to both good and bad effect. Like any musical instrument (and the electric guitar is absolutely NOT exempt from this condition), if used too often, it overstays its welcome and becomes irritating. But under no circumstances is it always, unequivocally an intrusive presence.

I'm very disappointed that someone who obviously has some taste in music (I like the Pumpkins, too, but not to the exclusion of anything else) could be so backward-thinking and narrow-minded. There are as many different kinds of synthesizers as there are guitars, by the way...if not more. Reducing all of them in one sweeping generalization to a toy used by 1980s vintage pop bands is simply a reflection of Greg MacFarlane's ignorance. Shame!

Ian Dawe

They say it takes a village

BY DANIEL CLARK

It never ceases to amaze me how much Dalhousie is a microcosm of society in general. We have police, bureaucracy (boy, do we have bureaucracy), sports, entertainment, and a wide variety of different occupations.

And like any good society Dal is divided up into various villages. These villages can be determined by what subjects we take, what clubs we join, and also by the more general historical barriers (sex, race, age, etc.).

What strikes me as odd is how we live and interact within this microcosm, and yet still ignore several pertinent areas of the society which are available to us.

In general there are more non-students going to Dalhousie Tiger games than students. Our plays are better populated by the city at large, as are our music and other social events. The other striking difference to me is the lack of interest in our local politics.

Politics at Dal affect the student as much as federal and provincial politics, but consistently the Dalhousie Student Union is lucky if 20 per cent of its constituents come out to vote.

To be a functioning member

of a society does not require a lot of work. The same responsibility which keeps us aware of what is occurring on the second floor of the SUB.

The Gazette works very hard to be a total news source for Dal students. We cover sports, entertainment, the university administration, and we cover the DSU. There is really no reason why anyone should not be aware of what is going on at this school, and knowing this, participate.

I know that if students give it a chance they will find it as fulfilling and enjoyable as I do. I am not encouraging Dal students to ignore exams and essays. What I am suggesting is that when you have an evening off, and are looking to go out with your friends, it is just as easy to get drunk at a Tiger's hockey game as it is at the Palace.

The same is true for the DSU. Instead of sitting in the Union Market vegetating during your break, read the Gazette and stay informed. When elections come up, walk confidently up to the pollster, and cast your vote.

We all have to live in this village, and only you can make it as good as it can be, and as good as it should be.

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Letters may be edited for length above 300 words and we reserve the right to edit commentary.

All submissions must be typed double-spaced on paper, e-mailed, or on a Mac or IBM 3 1/2 inch disk, in a WP version not greater than Word 6.0 or equivalent. The deadline is Mondays at 4:30 p.m.

97