

Gay, Bisexual, and Queer Men Call for Equity and Evidence in Blood Donation Policy



WHY RESEARCH BLOOD DONATION POLICY?

- Researchers and activists have long called for changes to blood donation policies to end what is often described as a discriminatory ban for men who have sex with men (MSM).
- In June 2019, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health recommended the “Government of Canada end all discriminatory practices related to blood, organ and tissue donation for MSM and trans people and adopt donor screening policies that are evidence-based, gender neutral, and behaviour-based”.
- In 2016, in Canada, a man had to be abstinent from all sexual contact (anal or oral sex) with other men for at least 12 months in order to be eligible to donate blood.
- As of June 3, 2019, this period of abstinence or deferral period was reduced to 3 months.
- We wanted to better understand what gay, bisexual, queer and other MSM living in Canada thought about different deferral policies, including 12 month and 3 month deferrals.

HOW DID WE RESEARCH THIS?

- We interviewed 47 gay, bisexual, queer, and other MSM living in Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal, who were recruited from the Engage study.
- We talked with these men about their beliefs regarding the blood donation policy at the time for MSM in Canada (12 month deferral) and potential future policy reforms.
- These interviews happened about 1-year before the policy was changed to the current 3-month deferral period.

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

- The majority of men interviewed were very critical of MSM-specific deferral policies and wanted a blood donation policy that was the “same for everyone” regardless of one’s sex and/or sexual orientation.
- Many believed that an equitable and safe policy was a scientifically informed policy. They wanted current policies to catch up to existing evidence on HIV testing.
- Some men didn’t understand why MSM are being deferred when all the collected blood is going to be tested.
- Regarding the 3-month deferral policy: some men thought it would be an incremental step in the right direction, others were more uncertain about whether or not it would be an improvement, and the great majority did not consider a 3-month policy deferral to be a significant improvement given that it would still be discriminatory and seemed illogical.

FOR THE FULL OPEN ACCESS PUBLICATION, PLEASE SEE:

Grace, D., Gaspar, M., Lessard, D., Klassen, B., Brennan, D.J., Adam, B., Jollimore, J., Lachowsky, N., Hart, T.A. (2019). *Gay and Bisexual Men’s Views on Reforming Blood Donation Policy in Canada*. *BMC Public Health*. 19:772
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We should look more at risky sexual behavior independently of a person’s sexual orientation or gender. [...] we have to extract that thing about sexual orientation in this policy. We are talking about blood, not about sexual orientation. You know, my blood is not supposed to be better or worse.

(AGE 34, HIV-NEGATIVE, MONTREAL)

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THESE FINDINGS?

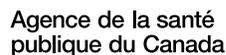
Our research findings have implications for the work of Canada’s blood operators, Canadian Blood Services and Héma-Québec. Moving forward, these organizations should:

1. Consider evidence-based alternatives beyond MSM deferral-based policies, including “gender blind” models (i.e. where risk behaviours are assessed equally regardless of sex or sexual orientation) such as those used in other countries like Italy and Spain.
2. Communicate the reasons why a 3-month deferral is necessary for MSM given existing testing technologies.
3. Perform outreach and dialogue with gay, bisexual, and queer men to establish trust and to better appreciate the multiple ways in which MSM-specific deferral policies have negatively impacted diverse communities.
4. Clearly demonstrate that policy decisions are being based on up-to-date scientific evidence, including research assessing ways to ensure the safety of the blood supply under policies not based on MSM-specific abstinence periods.

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A bit of a slap in the face because it'd be straight up ignorant. It's not actually looking at the [sexual] partnership. Again, pulling up to a [gay] couple that's been together for 20 years and being completely monogamous—for some reason they have to stop having sex for 3 months just [because] the blood might be tainted. What?

(AGE 24, HIV-NEGATIVE, TORONTO)

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SEE THE FULL PUBLICATION:

<https://rdcu.be/bG8wx>

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