

Stepping Stones or Second-Class Donors?

A Qualitative Analysis of Gay, Bisexual, and Queer Men's Perspectives on Plasma Donation Policy in Canada

WHY DID WE RESEARCH THIS TOPIC?

- Plasma demand is increasing for chronic and genetic conditions such as bleeding disorders, burns, and immunodeficiency. It is essential for treatments and therapies, but supply levels are inconsistent and unreliable in Canada and abroad.
- Gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (GBM) are not eligible to donate blood or plasma in Canada if they have been sexually active with another man in the last three months, despite the fact that all collected plasma is tested for viruses such as HIV and hepatitis C.
- While GBM blood donation restrictions have received considerable scholarly attention, little is known about the willingness of GBM to donate plasma were they to become eligible.

“ I see it as a positive. It's a start... I think that maybe, with this example, we could show that finally... it can work for blood as well.”

(AGE: IN THEIR 30S,
MONTREAL)

HOW DID WE RESEARCH THIS?

- Between March and October 2018, we recruited and conducted in-depth interviews with 39 HIV-negative GBM in Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal.
- We prioritized GBM with a lower likelihood of getting HIV and thus those who would be more likely eligible to donate blood or plasma in the future.
- Participants were asked how important being able to donate plasma was to them. Participants were also asked their thoughts on a hypothetical policy where GBM could donate plasma even if their sexual practices still prohibited them from donating blood.

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

- Most GBM expressed a general willingness to donate plasma if they became eligible. As with whole blood donation, they viewed plasma donation as a means of contributing to the health of others in need and potentially saving lives.
- Many GBM were less interested due to their uncertainty about plasma donation's importance or utility, and many were deterred when told that it took longer than whole blood donation and that plasma donors were expected to donate regularly.
- Some viewed the hypothetical change in plasma donation restrictions as not ideal but an improvement that would hopefully open the door to a more inclusive GBM blood donation policy. Others were critical of GBM-inclusive plasma donation if discriminatory blood regulations were not also lifted.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THESE FINDINGS?

- Our participants' interest in plasma donation underscores the desire of many within the GBM community to help others.
- Plasma donation reform efforts for GBM that ignore the historical and political context of blood donation restrictions will likely undermine the goals of Canada's blood collection initiatives.
- The communication of eligibility under a new policy program is a highly sensitive issue that requires careful consideration and consultation with diverse GBM communities in order to avoid further stigmatization.
- To successfully implement a revised policy for eligible GBM to become plasma donors, more education will be required. Efforts at increasing awareness and knowledge should address how plasma donation differs from blood donation (including the level of time commitment donors are making). The policy will also need to address the gulf between the critical importance of plasma donation and the feelings of many GBM who viewed this form of donation as somehow second tier in contrast with blood donation.

“ Yeah, I'd prefer they had the same policy [for both blood and plasma] for both [GBM and heterosexual people], right?”

(AGE: IN THEIR 60s, VANCOUVER)

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Dr. Daniel Grace, daniel.grace@utoronto.ca

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