

12 November 2010

Professor Steve Wesselingh
Chair of Review Committee
Faculty of Medicine Nursing & Health Sciences
Monash University
Building 64 – Wellington Road
Clayton Vic 3800

Dear Professor Wesselingh

Re: Review of Australian Blood Donor Deferrals related to Sexual Activity

ACON (formerly known as the AIDS Council of NSW) was formed in 1985 as part of the community response to the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Australia. Today, ACON is Australia's largest community-based gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) health and HIV/AIDS organisation. ACON provides information, support and advocacy for the GLBT community and people living with or at risk of acquiring HIV, including sex workers and people who use drugs in NSW.

Over our 25 year history, ACON has developed strong working relationships and partnerships with governments, researchers, a range of non-government organisations (NGOs), and health care providers in order to reduce the transmission of HIV, improve service delivery to people with HIV and to improve the health and wellbeing of the GLBT community. We have done this through our work in HIV education and prevention, treatment information, care and support and advocacy initiatives all within a framework that advocates for a society that protects and promotes human rights as the foundation for good health and the importance of taking an evidence-based approach.

ACON commends the Australian Red Cross for undertaking this review as it presents an important opportunity for the Blood Service to evaluate the deferral policy in light of the most up to date evidence and consider its application in the context of the implications of improvements in testing and disease surveillance mechanisms.

As a member of the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (AFAO), ACON endorses the submission made by AFAO to this review. As Australia's largest community-based HIV organisation, we would like to emphasise specific elements of AFAO's submission.

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Deferral period for gay men and other men who have sex with men

ACON supports AFAO's position in requesting that the Review Committee recommend the consideration of changing the length of the deferral period as it applies to gay men and other men who have sex with men (MSM).

This is informed by evidence that new testing methods such as nucleic acid testing can detect HIV much sooner than anti-body testing. While the window period of anti-body testing is generally to be understood as three months, nucleic acid testing dramatically shortens the window period down to around 11 days.

ACON, like AFAO, is under the impression that the Blood Service now tests every blood donation individually for HIV as opposed to the previous method of testing in "batches," which includes several blood samples and where a batch returns positive, each individual donation within the batch is then tested.

In light of these new developments, and the increased accuracy of individually testing for HIV using nucleic acid tests, the time period required to detect HIV is significantly reduced. If the testing technology and testing processes have indeed improved, the corresponding deferral period should be amended to reflect this.

A deferral period should be consistent with the necessary time required for HIV to be detected in the blood to ensure that policies take the least discriminatory approach to any group of people, where possible.

This is in recognition of the fact that gay men and MSM continue to face social and institutional stigma and discrimination. The impact of such discrimination has significant impacts on the social, emotional and mental wellbeing of gay men and MSM. From our perspective, a human rights approach to tackling discrimination is important to building a sustainable and effective community response to prevent the transmission of HIV.

Oral Sex

The current deferral policy for male to male sex includes oral sex (with or without a condom). ACON supports AFAO's position that the risk of HIV transmission is very low for both insertive and receptive partners engaged in fellatio regardless of whether a condom was used or not. Although little research have been conducted into the risk of HIV transmission through fellatio specifically, the general scientific consensus is that the risk is very low, not dissimilar to the risk of unprotected heterosexual intercourse in Australia. ACON supports the removal of oral sex from the deferral policy.

HIV Testing

ACON recognises that the Australian Red Cross Blood Service is not a sexual health service providing HIV testing services. To ensure that appropriate services are engaged by people who are uncertain of their HIV status, a social marketing campaign visible at Australian Red Cross Blood Service offices and online regarding appropriate HIV testing would be helpful. This would reduce the burden on the Australian Red Cross Blood Service by decreasing the likelihood of donors who are uncertain about their HIV status.

ACON also supports AFAO's submission that appropriate pre and post test discussion, counselling and referral pathways should remain available for donors who do discover their HIV positive status through a blood test.

Conclusions

ACON welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the *Review of Australian Blood Donor Deferrals related to Sexual Activity*, which will feed into the process of a development of a discussion paper to facilitate further consultations.

As a community-based service provider that works directly with people with HIV, communities at risk of HIV and the GLBT community, we look forward to being a part of the future stages involved in the consultation process.

If you would like to discuss any of the issues raised in this letter, please feel free to contact me on 02 9206 2122 or at nparkhill@acon.org.au.

Yours sincerely



Nicolas Parkhill
Chief Executive Officer