

DOCTOR?  
TRANSITION  
WILL I HAVE A



## Will I have a Transfusion, Doctor?

Recent articles in newspapers and programmes on radio and television have made us acutely aware of the possibility of catching AIDS from blood transfusions. This publicity has made many patients and their relatives worried about whether they will need to have a blood transfusion and whether there is any real danger that they will become infected with the AIDS virus.

Of course the media are absolutely right to draw our attention to these problems. Unfortunately this publicity can also make us worried out of all proportion to the true risks. Partly this reflects the exaggerated emphasis and dramatic headlines of some of the media coverage. It is, therefore, most important to get the true facts into perspective. Very few cases of AIDS have actually occurred from blood transfusions in the United Kingdom. Most of these occurred before the cause of AIDS was discovered and before screening tests could be introduced. In fact since the screening programmes began the risk has been estimated at less than one in a million. These screening procedures are continually being reassessed and improved so we expect the figures to remain exceptionally small.

The Transfusion Service is making every effort to ensure the safety of blood transfusion. The most important steps include:-

- (i) A careful enquiry into each blood donor's state of health.

- (ii) People at increased risk of harbouring the AIDS virus are told that they must never donate their blood.

- (iii) At the Blood Transfusion Laboratories all blood is tested for evidence of infection with the AIDS virus and for hepatitis and also for various other infectious illnesses.

As a last step your doctor will only give you a blood transfusion if it is clearly needed for your recovery. This means he or she takes all this information into account as well as your own personal need for a blood transfusion.

There have been concerns that the tests for the AIDS virus may not be 100% reliable. It has certainly been said that occasional cases of infection may be missed, particularly in the early stages. These instances are, in fact, exceptionally few in number, hence the one in a million risk level stated earlier. We hope to introduce improved tests to close even this small loophole in the very near future.

## Can I have my own Blood Instead?

Yes in theory you can. If your doctor considers you fit enough it may be possible to collect blood from people a week or so in advance of surgery as a precaution against future needs. Unfortunately it is impossible to make even that arrangement one hundred per cent safe. Collection and safeguarding of blood for transfusion is best done by specially trained staff, usually those of the

Blood Transfusion Service, who are aware of all the necessary precautions. The Transfusion Service cannot for various reasons organise individual collection of your own blood - most patients do not satisfy the rigorous fitness criteria for being blood donors and would have to have their blood collected in hospitals where advanced first aid facilities were close at hand. Because the blood collection would have to be carried out as a special arrangement by hospital staff who have other jobs to do, we consider the risks to be higher than that from receiving volunteer donor blood. Accordingly we do not advise use of your own blood as long as the risks of volunteer donor blood remain as low as they are.

Finally, it is important to get this very small risk from blood transfusion into perspective. The stated risk of one in a million is very small indeed, far less than the risks that confront many of us every day, during, for example driving, using domestic equipment in the home or playing many physical sports. Certainly the risks are very much less than those from smoking cigarettes. We cannot take away the risk entirely - it is very small indeed and we certainly intend to keep it that way. I do hope I have put your mind at rest.

**GRO-C**

Director of the Welsh Regional  
Transfusion Service



NATIONAL BLOOD TRANSFUSION SERVICE (WALES)  
GWASANAETH CENEDLAETHOL TRALLWYSO GWAED (CYMRU)

Director:  
J.A.F. Napier, PhD, FRCPath

Welsh Regional Transfusion Centre  
Rhydlafr  
Cardiff CF5 6XF

Tel: (0222) 890302

JAFN/EC

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To Consultant Haematologists,  
Copies to CMLSs, Blood Banks

Dear Colleague,

AUTOLOGOUS TRANSFUSION

As you may know I am strongly of the opinion that the risks attendant on being transfused with donor blood are so very low that it would not be justified to deploy the considerable resources that would be necessary for the establishment of autologous transfusion.

There is of course considerable media attention regarding this topic and many of you may be under pressure to provide autologous transfusion arrangements.

I have prepared the enclosed leaflet for patients who express an interest in the problem and I propose to send copies to hospital Unit Managers for internal distribution as they think fit. I envisage use in surgical outpatients and antenatal clinics. If you are in agreement with the idea or have further suggestions to make I would be glad to hear from you. I would also appreciate if you have an opportunity to discuss with your unit administrator regarding the best use of the leaflets.

I appreciate that the spread of AIDS is continuing and that there may be a need to reconsider our position. My advice is however based on current evidence.

Yours sincerely,

**GRO-C**

J.A.F. NAPIER  
Director

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