

## Do Patients Know They Have Been Transfused?

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Patients continue to express concern about receiving a blood transfusion, despite transfusion in the UK being safer now than ever before. However, not all patients who have been transfused are aware of this fact [1]. We determined the proportion of patients who were aware of their transfusion and showed how awareness has changed with time.

In a prospective study to determine the incidence of transfusion-transmitted infections in the UK [2], 9,220 adult patients who had received a red cell transfusion were recruited from 22 hospitals in the North West Thames area. Patients were excluded if they were confused or unable to understand what was being asked, if their life expectancy was less than 9 months or if they were immunosuppressed. Many of the patients recruited underwent elective surgery, but some general medical patients were included. Between May 1995 and May 1996, 3,239 recruits to the study were asked, within 2 weeks of their transfusion, whether they were aware that they had received a blood transfusion. This question was asked in a standard way by three research nurses and a doctor recruiting at the hospitals. Patients who were not certain, but believed that they might have been transfused, were counted as being aware. We did not determine if any specific information or consent procedures relating to transfusion were being used at hospitals but simply identified what proportion of patients did not know that they had been transfused.

In total, 537 of 3,239 (17%) patients were not aware that they had been transfused. Figure 1 shows how awareness increased during that year: this may reflect increased discussion of transfusion and greater patient concern. The percentage of patients at each hospital (between March and May 1996) who did not know they had been transfused

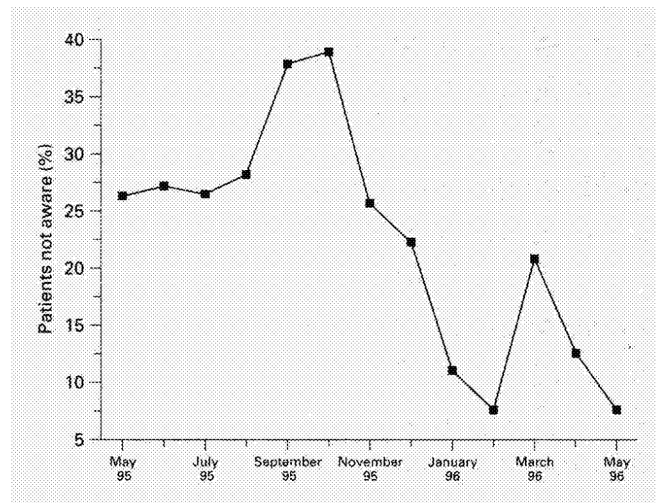


Fig. 1. Patient unawareness of blood transfusion.

ranged from 2 to 40% (median = 16%). Overall, the percentage of patients who were unaware of their transfusion was similar to that reported previously [1]. The level of awareness of transfusion amongst surgical patients varied with the type of surgery performed. We found that patients undergoing coronary artery bypass grafts were less likely to know of their transfusion (62% aware) than patients undergoing other procedures (86%) such as total hip or knee replacements, urological and general surgical procedures. This might suggest that awareness is procedure related. However, at four hospitals performing solely elective orthopaedic surgery, the percentage of patients unaware of transfusion ranged from 11 to 22%, indicating that awareness may depend on hospital rather than procedure. We were unable to conclude firmly whether awareness was related to the procedure or hospital, since the two hospitals where patients were least aware both specialized in cardiothoracic surgery. Despite increasing awareness during the year studied, and the exclusion of confused patients from the study, a significant proportion of patients were completely unaware that transfusion was involved in their surgical treatment.

Where possible, information about the likely use of blood should be included in pre-operative information for patients. The issue of informed consent for transfusion might then be simplified.

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#### *References*

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