Blood for sale: A new low for the Canadian blood system

Selling blood for profit is socially exploitative. It is no different than targeting the needy to sell their organs for a pittance.

By: Michael McCarthy Published on Tue Mar 05 2013

Two decades ago, 30,000 Canadians, recipients of blood and plasma products, were infected with HIV and hepatitis C. Some of the tainted blood was purchased from "blood brokers" whose supplies came from Arkansas prisons, L.A.’s “skid row” and Russian funeral homes. Confronted with a blood shortage and weighing the odds, Health Canada and the Canadian Red Cross, then stewards of Canada’s blood system, accepted it anyway.

As a hemophiliac, I was among the unfortunate Canadians who received tainted blood and became infected with hepatitis C. Newlywed and starting a family, I chose to deal with my fate by dedicating my life to obtaining compensation for the victims and creating a blood system with integrity. Together with fellow victims like John Plater and James Kreppner, we launched a massive battle with the federal and provincial governments that resulted in $5 billion in settlements, the largest of its kind in Canada.

During this high-profile battle, the federal government launched a public inquiry, headed by Justice Horace Krever. He produced numerous recommendations that ultimately overhauled the blood system in Canada making it safer and better. Many of the advocates I came to know as friends have since succumbed to their infections. I’m practically the last man standing.

I cannot stay silent while our blood system is again compromised. In the next few weeks the federal government is preparing for an announcement to approve a privately owned plasma clinic that will pay donors $20 to take their blood and sell it at a profit on the open international market.

The location of this Toronto clinic is being proposed next to a homeless shelter — it will be the homeless, the economically challenged and students who will find the $20 fee an
attractive incentive upon which to base the decision on whether or not to donate blood. Selling blood for profit is socially exploitative. It is no different than those black markets that target the needy to sell their organs for a pittance. In turn, the organs are sold at profit. Blood is life — not as difficult to remove as a kidney, but the principle is the same.

This new policy lacks the necessary transparency and examination required to understand potential risks. What happens when blood is purchased from populations with an increased incidence of transmittable disease, including those for which we may have no tests? What happens to donorship? What are the implications of selling for-profit blood on the international market?

Currently, the newly created blood system run by Canadian Blood Services (CBS) receives $1 billion of provincial funding annually to run donor clinics, to test and distribute blood products in Canada and to prevent commoditizing Canadian blood supplies — a lesson that should have been learned. It relies on volunteer blood donors who give blood for altruistic reasons.

We are told by those in charge that the new blood-for-money clinics won’t harm the current volunteer donor base; that the system is safe with rigorous testing; that science will protect us and that the odds of tainted blood are “one in a million.” Health Canada is dangerously close to accepting these arguments.

I cannot. Having fought a system that protected itself and cost taxpayers billions to debunk victims’ claims or accept responsibility, I’ve heard each of these arguments before. We cannot be so trusting again. All it takes is a shortage of blood, a bad economic environment or a new virus to trigger the next tainted blood scandal. We need transparency and examination to ensure that policies don’t encourage risk.

Advocates of fee-for-blood clinics, say that our current not-for-profit system is unsustainable. With $1 billion in annual funding, I don’t accept that. The CBS reportedly claims it will not purchase the blood from these clinics for Canadian use, which weakens the supply shortage argument made by advocates. There is no good reason for this policy other than profit at the expense of the poor.

As one who has relied on donated blood, I believe that Canadians step up to the plate when asked. Our governments, regulators and Canadian Blood Services would be well advised to debate and study this policy, which might be a slippery slope to another batch of tainted blood.

This time, I may not be around to help fight.

Michael McCarthy is former vice-president of the Canadian Hemophilia Society and was lead plaintiff for Canadians Affected by Tainted Blood.

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