

WHEN IT'S BLOOD, PROTECTION IS BETTER THAN CURE

The first right of every consumer is the right to safety, which means protection against unsafe and hazardous products and services. When the product in question is human blood, safety assumes greater importance as many consumers have suffered due to unsafe blood.

A hospital in Tamil Nadu, acting on the compatibility certificate issued by the blood bank, transfused blood to a patient who fell victim to Hepatitis B, as the blood was infected. This brings us to the question of the working of blood bank, particularly those which collect blood from professional donors.

Despite the fact that blood is such a serious subject, no proper study was made till 1990 when the Government of India appointed A.F. Ferguson and Company to study the blood banking system in the country.

The study reported that there were 1,018 blood banks, out of which only 616 were licensed. It said that no medical check-up is done on the blood sellers and their health status is not examined. More importantly, mandatory tests are rarely conducted and storage facilities in the blood bank are far from satisfactory.

It is frightening to note that only 30 per cent of the blood in the country is tested and 12 percent of AIDS cases nationwide have a history of blood transfusion. The reason for this sorry state of affairs is that demand and supply for blood do not match. Thereby, quality has suffered.

It is estimated that India needs around 9.8 million units (bottles) per year out of which supply from voluntary donors is hardly 1.8 million units. While Karnataka requires 500 units per day, the supply from the voluntary sector is less than 100 units. However, it doesn't mean that blood banks can overlook the safety of the consumers.

Recognizing the need to regulate the blood business and safety of the consumers, the Drugs and Cosmetics Act was amended in 1993, providing for collection, storage, processing and distribution of human blood.

For example, the Act says that the minimum area for a blood bank should be 100 square metres with 7 rooms of which 3 rooms should be air-conditioned. Separate rooms are to be provided for examination, blood collection, laboratory, records room etc.

It also specifies the equipment to be available for blood collection, haemoglobin determination, blood components and blood transfusion sets.

A blood bank should have a special refrigerator wherein blood can be stored at 4-6 degree Centigrade. Recently, a Delhi-based newspaper published a photograph showing blood stored in an almirah in a Delhi hospital.

It is mandatory for a blood bank to have one person with an MBBS degree with 6 month's experience in blood bank maintenance, a nurse, technician, lab assistant and attendant.

The blood banks are supposed to have a blood bank manual and maintain proper records and registers of blood donors, blood stock and issue of blood.

It is obligatory on the part of the blood bank to issue a cross-matching report. Blood bottles or sachets should be labeled with information like date of drawing the blood, expiry date and the blood group. Kits approved by the Drugs Controller of India or National AIDS Control organization should be used.

However, many blood banks across the country are yet to come up to the levels indicated in the Act. It is said that licences will be cancelled if they do not follow the provision in toto. But when the licences will be cancelled is the moot question.

In addition, the Supreme Court in its judgment in the case of 'Common cause vs Union of India' has directed the government to take some measures in order to improve the status of blood banks.

Firstly, a national council and state councils of blood transfusion are to be established. But these councils do not provide for any legal or consumer representatives.

Therefore, there is no transparency and the public cannot have access to its activities despite being registered as a society.

The court also directed the government to take steps to encourage voluntary donation and the system of taking blood from professional donors was to be completely eliminated within 1996. However, now the target date is December 1997.

One only hopes that consumers will be able to get safe blood from January 1998.

What you should know

There are four main groups – A, B, AB and O. blood of the same group should always be given. In case of emergency, O may be given to a patient belongs to any group.

A healthy individual has a volume of 5-6 litres of blood.

Donation means 300 ml of blood.

Donation blood is recouped by the body within 36 hours.

Blood should be donated by persons in the age group of 18 and 60 years. Minimum weight should be 45 kg. The hemoglobin content should be 12.5 gm for males and 11.5 gm for females.

Pregnant and lactating women should not donate blood.

Patients suffering from diabetes, hypertension, kidney ailments, leprosy and with a history of jaundice should not donate blood.
