

This article tells the story of how one gay young mans fell foul of the British National Blood Transfusion Service's policy toward homosexuals donating blood. It uncovers a discriminatory attitude apparently based more on supposition than science. Runs to 1,569 words.

We Be of One Blood you and I?

From an outsider's point of view, the UK might seem like a place where gay freedom and equality have reached their zenith. After all, since the 'crime' of homosexuality was removed from the statute books, gay's here have enjoyed a hard-won liberty our brethren in other countries might look upon with some degree of jealousy.

To illustrate, picture this. It's a warm, balmy summer's day in central London. You're a 16 year old boy fresh out of the closet and have spent the day basking in the sunshine of your new found identity with thousands of other people just like you gathered together on the annual gay Mardi Gras.

Exhausted but elated after your banner waving march through city streets lined with thousands of supporters and gaggles bemused tourists, you now stand in the middle of Old Compton Street - the bustling heart of London's gay village.

Gathered before you in their hundreds are more shaved heads, pierced nipples, cut off denim shorts, studded leather waistcoats, tight t shirts and freshly pumped pecks than you can shake a stick at. The thought that you could cheerfully bed any one of them perfectly legally makes more than just your head throb with excitement and anticipation.

Your TV schedules are awash with gay characters refreshingly absent of limp wrist and mincing gait and there's even a programme solely dedicated to your lifestyle on that bastion of British establishment - the BBC. Should you feel the urge, you can import gay erotic videos without fear of a knock at the door from

Her Majesty's Customs and Excise and your favourite pop star has recently come out and become all the more popular for it. All is right with the world, just perfect. Or is it?

No, there's trouble in 'paradise' and it's called The National Blood Service. This is an organisation whose vital and worthy remit is to promote, organise and coordinate the collection of blood from donors around the country for transfusions to those in need but whose attitude to gay men is, as I discovered, illogical and discriminatory.

It all began a few weeks ago when the N.B.S. embarked on a television and poster advertising campaign encouraging us all to 'be a hero' and save a life. So on one sunny April afternoon with my conscience suitably pricked, my ego massaged and my cape flapping majestically in the breeze I made my way to the local donor centre, determined to give up my bodily fluids for the greater good.

Once inside and after a cheerful greeting from the nurse, I settled back to read the preliminary information she had given me, secure in the assumption I was healthy, fit, with no known blood disorder and therefore eligible to donate.

However, my super human aura of magnanimity was blown away faster than a speeding bullet, not by one of Lex Luthor's cunning plans but by a section at the end of the booklet, which read as follows: -

"You should **never** give blood if:

- 1. You carry the hepatitis B virus, the hepatitis C virus or the HIV virus.*
- 2. You're a man who's had sex with another man, even "safe sex" using a condom.*
- 3. You've ever worked as a prostitute.*
- 4. You've ever injected yourself with drugs - even once."*

Not quite believing what I had just seen I read again but no, there I was lumped in with prostitutes and drug users as an excluded group, but on what grounds? Of course, no one would want to give blood if they knowingly carried a blood virus or engaged in activities that put them at risk of exposure, but even then the literature re-assured: -

“Every single blood donation is tested for HIV (the virus that causes AIDS) and hepatitis B and C. Infected blood isn't used in transfusions but our test may not always detect the early stages of viral infection. The chance of infected blood getting past our screening tests is very small, but we rely on your help and co-operation.”

However, what this small exclusion clause was doing was pre-judging and rejecting me not upon a basis of solid medical evidence, not because I was a prostitute or injected drugs, nor because I was wearing my underpants outside my tights and hailed from the planet Krypton but simply because, wholesome or not, I was gay, case closed. From hero to leper in less than a second.

I went back to the nurse, puzzled by this seemingly illogical and offensive statement. “This means you can never give blood” she re-iterated with an apologetic smile and without explanation, as if my humiliation was not quite enough and the poison arrow of ostracism had to be driven home. Shocked and disappointed I left the premises feeling like a second class citizen, my cape in tatters.

I immediately got in touch with Sharon McGowan, Head of Donor Responses at the National Blood Service via their web site (www.bloodnet.nbs.nhs.uk) and asked her to explain why, as a robust gay man, my blood would be rejected out of hand. She claims that they are acting on the advice of the Expert Advisory

Group on AIDS, a body set up to advise on donor selection when HIV was first recognised.

The E.A.G.'s opinion is that if the prevalence of an infection in a particular population reaches 1% or above, individuals from that population should not be accepted as donors. Because the current figure in the male homosexual population is somewhere in the region of 20%, all homosexuals, including those at 'low risk' are to be excluded. According to Ms McGowan, the Terrence Higgins Trust supports this policy but they declined to respond to my enquiries.

That the incidence of HIV in the gay population is higher than average, I have no doubt, and a cautionary approach to any blood donated by any man or woman, gay or straight is both logical and sensible where that donor is in a risk group. To be fair to the B.D.S. are not just excluding gay men, as Ms McGowan explains: -

"Individuals who have injected drugs are also excluded from giving blood, because the prevalence of hepatitis C virus has been found to be as high as 70% in this population. The rationale behind these instructions is that in population with a high prevalence of a particular infection there will also be a comparatively high number of individuals in the "window period" compared with populations with low prevalence. The "window period" is that time between infection and the ability of any testing procedure to detect the infection. This "window period" can never be zero and the questioning of donors about lifestyle is designed to reduce risk as far as is possible.

Similarly we also do not accept as donors individuals of any race who have been sexually active in Sub-Saharan Africa, because heterosexual sex is the main route of transmission of HIV in that part of the world."

If the bone of contention is therefore the 'window period' between contracting HIV and the ability to detect infection, could not a far more sensible and less indiscriminate procedure be based on the donor's *confirmed* HIV status, acquired both through regular independent testing for a period of time deemed adequate for detection and the B.D.S.'s own screening, rather than on pure supposition?

Fortunately, Ms McGowan gives hope for the evolution of a more reasoned approach: -

"The rules are constantly reviewed and interestingly enough there has been a suggestion raised in perhaps allowing gay men to donate if they have not had sex with another man for a year. After all it would seem logical to allow this as after a year the test would certainly identify infected individuals. Presently, this suggestion has been dismissed on the basis that we cannot rely entirely on testing in this case. With developments occurring all the time, we hope that we may see a solution to this problem in the future."

Let's hope so because, for the time being, you as a gay man are guilty until proven innocent, a complete reversal of the famous maxim enshrined in universal law that requires conclusive evidence of culpability before condemnation. The regulations, as they stand, seek to 'tar everyone with the same brush' and to exclude the individual not on evidence, but on reputation alone.

This whole sorry incident reminded me of a passage from Rodyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. Mowgli, a boy who had lived in the wild all his life and been brought up by Wolves saw no difference between himself and the other creatures of the forest. Upon being saved from danger by Kaa, the great Rock Python, he thanks the snake according to Jungle custom thus: "We be one blood, thou and I. I take my life from thee tonight. My kill shall be thy kill if ever thou art hungry, O Kaa."

You may have thought the same, that the existence of our pubs, clubs, bars, shops, television programs and equalities enshrined in law meant we were at last recognised as being the same as everyone else, that “we be of one blood”. Alas, it seems that to the National Blood Service, for now, our blood does not run red but instead flows with a lighter hue - and pink is not the colour of heroes.

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