



GAY 'MILITANT' STAYS BLOODY MINDED

The South African National Blood Service (SANBS) will not reword its hotly contested 'gender insensitive' donor deferral questionnaire – because it believes that male-to-male sex poses a higher risk for HIV infection than heterosexual encounters.

Angry gay activists want the offending question reworded to exclude the words 'male-to-male' and simply to ask whether the donor has had any 'anal or oral sex' in the past 5 years – without reference to gender (currently it speaks of 'male-to-male anal or oral sex, with or without a condom').

They cite the overwhelmingly heterosexual nature of the HIV pandemic in South Africa (versus it being largely homosexual overseas) and the paucity of local gay HIV data, adding that blood testing is so accurate that continued deferrals based on sexual activity are unnecessary and unjust.

The SANBS told *Izindaba* that it might tinker with the question to ask whether prospective donors have had male-to-male sex over the last 12 months instead of over the last 5 years, but this exclusion period is the only adjustment they are willing to contemplate.

Two senior SANBS officials, Professor Anthon Heyns (CEO) and Dr Robert Crookes (Medical Director), say they have 'an ethical, moral and legal responsibility' to take seriously the best available research in order to ensure the safety of blood recipients. Both said they would welcome the Constitutional Court weighing up the rights of recipients against the rights of donors and called for independent research to redress the paucity of data around HIV/AIDS incidence in the local gay community.

Heyns told *Izindaba* that poor understanding of his organisations' rigorous approach to blood safety led to gay activists and the Human Rights Commission labelling their question 'gender insensitive'.

'Don't stigmatise us'

The activists claim that without local scientific evidence, gay men are being unfairly lumped together with those who pay for sex, intravenous needle users and people who are promiscuous. Known high-risk groups locally include South African females aged 15 - 24 (8 times higher HIV incidence than males), while 1 in 10 married, heterosexual South African couples was HIV positive. They point to neither of these two groups being asked to 'self-exclude' by answering questions that labelled or stigmatised them.



Professor Anthon Heyns, CEO of the South African National Blood Service.

The controversy exploded into the public arena on Friday, 13 January this year when a militant 'organisation' calling itself the Gay and Lesbian Alliance (GLA) claimed to have surreptitiously donated blood across the country, using false identities.

Universal antipathy

While the mainstream gay community distanced themselves from the protest, they agreed with the underlying sentiment, accusing the SANBS of being 'prejudiced and homophobic'. The alleged protest, of which no direct evidence was gleaned, led to threats of legal action by an alarmed SANBS.

It quickly reassured the public that red blood cells were no longer taken from first-time donors, adding that nucleic acid testing technology introduced last year dramatically reduced the window period during which infected blood could remain undetected. (Best reduction estimates are from between 16 and 22 days down to between 6 and 11 days – but longer for certain individuals.)

The SANBS warned that it could forensically 'fingerprint' blood back to any named donors who had knowingly lied about their HIV status, enabling civil action by an infected recipient – and cited overseas legal precedent. The public broadside sent the GLA underground, amid vows to continue 'for 10 years if necessary', until the blood service capitulated.

Protest spark

David Baxter, GLA 'Media Director', told *Izindaba* that Health Minister Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang managed to get the SANBS to radically change its 'racist' blood selection policy 'in just a few months' last year – at a cost of R90 million.

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'After 2 years of constantly being fobbed off with vague promises by Dr Crookes, that move proved the last straw for us – we had to go over to action, no other gay groups were doing anything effective,' he explained.

Baxter said all the SANBS had to do was 'target the risk itself and not gay people'.

He strongly denied that the GLA's aim was to introduce HIV-infected blood into the system, as reported in



Thoko Ntshinga (actress and lecturer at UCT Drama School) gets a hand in donating her blood from one of the Pathcare sisters.

some lay media. 'We are donating gay blood – they have the technology to exclude HIV, they just mustn't stigmatise us as a group – like they did black people.' The campaign would continue nationally, using the SANBS 'honesty cards' (a 'take home' contact card with a bar-code, enabling donors who wanted to retrospectively reveal confidential information) to track the GLA's progress. 'We've turned the honesty card against them – it's a perfect device for us to track how our donations are going,' Baxter said.

Doing the best we can

Heyns said that SANBS monitoring of the best available research showed that male-to-male anal or oral sex posed a higher risk than heterosexual anal or oral sex.

Asking the gender-specific anal sex question remained best blood collection practice in North America, Europe, New Zealand and Australia, with only the behavioural exclusion time period varying between 1 year and a lifetime.

Statistical modelling in the UK predicted a 500% increase in HIV prevalence for donated blood if the controversial question was taken out and a 60% increase in prevalence if it was left in, and the exclusion period reduced from permanent exclusion (currently UK practice) to 1 year. 'To be fair this example comes from England and not here, but there have been similar results elsewhere. We cannot ignore them just because of a paucity of local data,' he added.

United States Center for Disease Control (CDC) survey data show that HIV and AIDS have had a 'tremendous effect on men who have sex with men (MSM)'. MSM accounted for approximately two-thirds of all HIV infections among USA men in 2003. This was in spite of only about 5 - 7% of men in the USA identifying themselves as MSM.

Heyns said the SANBS was pushing for a 'truth and understanding indaba' with gay organisations, the national Department of Health and the Human Rights Commission. The Constitution made provision for unfair discrimination and the SANBS had chosen to lean towards the rights of the blood recipient. 'Maybe a wise person needs to rule,' he mused.

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Heyns compared the blood service's holistic and conservative approach to road safety. 'You have to look at the speed limit, safety belts, air bags, road lighting, robots, drivers licences, double and solid lines, single roads, tarred and dirt roads, potholes – each one has a different impact. You can't argue that maybe in South Africa, because road conditions are more important than safety belts, we do away with safety belts.'

The GLA initially threatened that on Friday, 13 January more than 100 gay men would donate blood across the country without first disclosing their sexual activities. Heyns confirmed having received a fax with the names of 8 GLA 'executive members' who allegedly donated blood – none of whom he said could subsequently be traced on the service's computer system. While he acknowledged they could

have used false names, Heyns said there had been no 'spike' in donations to support any GLA claims – which Baxter disputed, boasting that his campaign would be stepped up in coming months.

Bloody déjà vu

It is the second time in just over a year that the SANBS has suffered bruising media coverage. Last year revelations that the service was racially profiling blood fuelled a political furore, resulting in the introduction of an entirely new statistical risk model underpinned by the highly regarded individual donation nucleic acid testing. This maintained blood safety – at the extra R90 million cost. The SANBS defended itself by claiming that the average risk of a black South African being HIV positive was 100 times greater than that of a white compatriot and that their primary responsibility was to protect blood recipients.

Glenn de Swardt of the Triangle Project, the oldest gay service organisation in the country, says the SANBS questionnaire is 'prejudiced and homophobic'. 'It contributes to the stigmatisation and marginalisation of the gay community.'

The editor of **mambaonline.com**, a popular gay lifestyle website, Luiz de Barros, who is a prolific networker, said none of his colleagues and acquaintances had been able to secure proof of the GLA's membership or even knew individual members. De Barros said he believed the lay media had 'bought into an elaborate hoax'. Baxter however claimed the GLA to be 'the country's largest gay and lesbian grouping with 157 000 members (100 000 male)' who each paid a R25 annual fee – and that it would register as a political party for the 2009 elections 'within the next 2 months'.

Baxter says the GLA's 'research' among 3 000 local gay and bi men aged 18 - 45 of all races showed that only 45% 'took part in sexual activities relating to anal sex'.

Chris Bateman