

Giving blood spurs discussion for change

**A MAN WHO HAS HAD SEX WITH A MAN
EVEN ONCE SINCE 1977 MAY NOT GIVE BLOOD.**

U.S. FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION

**ANYONE WHO HAS HAD SEX WITH AN HIV POSITIVE
MEMBER OF THE OPPOSITE SEX MAY GIVE BLOOD
AFTER 12 MONTHS.**

U.S. FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION

GIVING BLOOD IS one of the easiest ways to make a critical difference in the life of a complete stranger. Yet most people don't even think about donating blood until the blood mobile rolls up in the parking lot at work.

In January 2008, San José State suspended campus blood drives because the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) lifetime donor deferral barring gay men from giving blood violates the university's non-discrimination policy. Now *everyone* is thinking about blood.

AN EDUCATED DECISION

SJSU President Don W. Kassing's bold move against discrimination was anything but rash or political. After consulting experts and nearly nine months of research, Kassing made the announcement, which sparked a national public debate about blood safety.

"It was a clear-cut policy issue," says Seth Hodge, the SJSU residential life coordinator who filed the original complaint that brought the issue to Kassing's attention. "We're not discouraging people from giving blood; we're saying it can't happen on our property because of our non-discrimination policy."

Kassing's difficult decision to uphold SJSU's non-discrimination policy shows his commitment to honoring *all* campus members, says Rona Halualani, SJSU associate professor and director of institutional planning and inclusive excellence, a position Kassing recently created.

"The overwhelmingly unquestioned nature of the FDA's policy underscores how much we need to reexamine the issue and create a dialogue about it as informed citizens," says Halualani.

OBSTINANCE, NOT SCIENCE

FDA's policy prohibiting blood donations from men who have sex with men dates back to 1983, when the risk of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) from transfusion was first recognized. America's Blood Centers, the American Red Cross and AABB say the policy is based on decades-old research and should be relaxed.

According to its Web site, the FDA is concerned that even advances in antibody tests and nucleic acid amplification testing used to screen blood will not mitigate the increased risk of accepting blood from gay men—and that only more research will determine actual risk.

When Kassing met with FDA officials in March to discuss the issue, the outcome was less than encouraging. "The FDA says it is letting new science dictate its policies, but they're not doing any new research," says Larry Carr, SJSU associate vice president for Public Affairs.

And at an FDA hearing held in 2006, Dr. Harvey Alter, chief of the infectious disease section in the Department of Transfusion Medicine at the National Institutes of Health, seemed to conclude that new research on the complex mathematical models used to determine risk would not be productive.

"We usually come out of these conferences and say we need more studies; we need to remodel; we need to look at new populations, and this and that," Alter said. "I think anything that will happen on the remodeling will make it even safer than the models show now."

Still, the FDA will not budge.

STEPS TOWARD CHANGE

"The FDA is like a rusty old barge that's stuck in a muddy slough," says Wiggys Sivertsen, SJSU professor of sociology and longtime advocate for human rights. "And it's going to take a battering ram to push it out into the ocean of enlightenment."

San José State's suspension of campus blood drives was the nudge many needed to begin learning and talking about the blood supply and discrimination—and to take action.

The diverse responses to Kassing's decision, both positive and negative, have come from doctors, students, military personnel, SJSU staff and faculty in most disciplines, and from as far away as Connecticut, Wisconsin and Texas.

The San José City College/Evergreen Community College District has suspended blood drives on its two campuses. The Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors announced its disapproval of the FDA's policy, as did the Santa Clara County Council of Churches. U.S. Reps. Mike Honda, Sam Farr and Zoe Lofgren are actively working on changing the policy, and U.S. Sens. Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein have shown interest in joining the discussion.

"Even if San José State disappears entirely from this discussion tomorrow, it's not going to be over," says Carr. "The discussion is happening in places where it needs to happen for change to occur."

Continuing the public debate is vital to educating people about changing the FDA policy and building awareness about the blood supply.

GET INFORMED.

JOIN THE DISCUSSION.

GIVE BLOOD.

—Jody Ulate, '05

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