

Nova Scotia Rainbow Action Project's Response to Canadian Blood Services' MSM Donor Criteria Change

Today Canadian Blood Services (CBS) announced a change to their donor exclusion policy, which previously included a lifelong ban on donations from those who CBS deems to be "men who have sex with men" (MSM). The lifelong ban is being changed to a five-year deferral period following the donor's last "MSM activity."

The Nova Scotia Rainbow Action Project (NSRAP) has voted to support a change to a five-year deferral with the promise of further incremental changes in a timely and evidence-based manner.

While this change brings CBS closer to a policy based on behavior and not sexual orientation, it remains a discriminatory policy based on outdated stereotypes of the queer community and blocks many healthy donors from contributing to the blood supply. The five-year deferral means that amongst the people that CBS considers MSM donors, only those who are abstinent for five years or more may donate blood.

Like the lifetime ban, the five-year deferral period does not take into account if the individual has used protection, the varying levels of risk associated with different types of sexual acts, or their relationship status.

CBS's decision to move to a five-year deferral is a result of the large amount of public pressure exerted by members of the queer community and our allies, as well as a concerted campaign by several advocacy groups to end the ban.

NSRAP is pleased to have been one of the organizations consulted by CBS while they explored this policy change. CBS consulted a variety of organizations, including those who advocate for lifting the ban and patient advocacy groups who favour the ban. The five-year deferral represents a compromise between two groups of stakeholder organizations with conflicting views on the subject.

The impact of tainted blood transfusions in Canada's history cannot be minimized. However, scientific evidence does not support the need for a lifetime deferral, and CBS acknowledges that the change to a five-year deferral is a first step in incremental shift and will be reviewed as new data and technologies emerge.

NSRAP will continue to advocate for a behavior-based screening tool, one that does not exclude Canadians from donating blood based on their sexual orientation.

As always, NSRAP encourages and thanks those who are able to donate and choose to do so.