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MEDICARE

Where are the volunteers?

DR. SARANYA NANDAKUMAR

Despite awareness, the gap between demand for and supply of blood still looms large.

PHOTO: PTI



Campaigns aplenty: Despite celebrity endorsements, the movement has not picked up steam.

It's been several years of talking to young, not so young, prospective first-time, voluntary first-time and repeat blood donors. There have been heart warming tales, some matter-of fact responses and some plain rude ones.

A look at some of the attitudes towards blood donation threw up some interesting information. Despite the numerous drives organised by various blood banks, blood donation is yet to become a habit in this part of the world.

Creating awareness

The most frequent reason cited for not donating blood is that the person was not asked, and the second was that he/she had not thought about blood donation nor had the opportunity arisen. A young techie remarked that it was an eye-opener to him that blood banks "needed" donors and blood. He and many of his peer group had always been under the impression that banks were always well stocked and that it was "only in a one-off situation" that the hunt for donors began.

This donor was then asked if he knew where blood banks got blood routinely. To which he replied, "Don't know. Must be someone like me". And there was a glimmer of dawning realisation; he remarked in surprise, "Don't tell me, you have to do this every day." We had to

confess that we had to, as otherwise we would not be able to meet the requirement. He left promising to return with a few of his friends after four months.

The IT sector is the most targeted one and it is common to see various blood banks at work wooing young men and women to donate blood. Organising a camp requires tremendous skill in public relations, immense patience and a sense of humour. Several companies are extremely committed to the cause; some, however, need more convincing before they agree to have a camp. One of the chief reasons is the disruption in work. Taking the donor couch to the workplace has helped tremendously, but has not got rid of this problem completely. Sometimes it also happens that when everything seems fixed, the company is approached by another blood bank for a camp a few days hence. Sometimes, after several rounds of discussion, the company decides that it'd rather not support the cause. The hunt for yet another company begins once more....

Getting donors doesn't solve the problem. The donor needs to satisfy the eligibility criteria to be able to donate. The donated blood has to be screened for transfusion transmissible infections and only after the blood is certified fit for use, can this be transfused. On an average, blood banks reject about five per cent of collected units as they are unsafe. In some banks with more stringent testing protocols, this figure can be as high as 10 per cent. According to recent statistics released by the National Aids Control Organisation, currently Tamil Nadu collects 2,65,000 donations and it is estimated that this requirement will increase to 6,24,000 every year. On a national level, currently 4.5 million blood donations are collected and the demand is projected to increase to 10 million. These are frightening statistics that underline the urgent need for healthy voluntary blood donors.

Several questions are raised and the plight of blood banks and camp organisers needs some thought. Why do blood banks need blood? Why do they have to struggle so much to get blood? Who stands to gain from blood obtained from a blood bank? Despite so much awareness about blood and blood safety, why are we still unable to bridge the gap between demand for and supply of blood? Are we approaching the wrong age group? Where are blood banks going wrong?

Take it to schools

A regular blood donor commented that the importance of blood donation needed to be stressed at the school level. Perhaps we too need to take a leaf out of the South African experience that, out of necessity, has one of the best transfusion services in the world today.

India has always been known for its quality as well as affordability in the healthcare sector. While the requirement of blood has steadily increased, unfortunately the number of blood donors has not kept pace with the increase. This has only added further to the stress levels of the donor motivators.

Until synthetic blood becomes a reality, we still require this life-giving liquid from human volunteers. If everyone between the ages of 18-60 decided to find out if they were eligible to donate blood and donated blood to any good blood bank, no one would die for want of blood. Blood donation has been cited as an example of true altruism in action. None of us knows when we might go under a surgeon's knife. Wouldn't we too be more relieved if we knew we didn't have to hunt around for donors at the final hour? Wouldn't we be far more relaxed if we knew that blood banks were adequately stocked with screened and safe blood through the year?

The writer is with the Jeevan Blood Bank and Research Centre, Chennai.

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