

## **FDA to Review Ban on Gay Men Donating Blood**

By Rob Stein  
From The Washington Post  
March 18, 2006

The Food and Drug Administration is considering revising its policy that bars as a blood donor any man who has had sex with another man since 1977, officials said yesterday.

The change in policy is being recommended by the American Red Cross, the American Association of Blood Banks and America's Blood Centers, which collect virtually all the blood used for transfusions nationwide.

The three groups requested the change at a March 8 workshop the FDA convened to review the latest scientific information about the safety of the blood supply, arguing that current tests and screening methods have improved enough to protect transfusion recipients without the lifetime ban.

Instead, the group recommended that men be barred from donating for only a year after having had sex with another man, treating them the same as other groups at increased risk for spreading sexually transmitted virus through donated blood.

"We strongly support the use of rational, scientifically based deferral policies, and we want them to be applied fairly and consistently," said Ryland Dodge, a Red Cross spokesman.

The FDA implemented the lifetime ban in the mid-1980s when concerns about the spread of the human immunodeficiency virus, which causes AIDS, were running high and many questions remained about the ease with which people could spread the virus and the reliability of screening methods. Since then, the accuracy of testing has improved substantially, as have questionnaires that all donors answer to identify those posing the greatest risk, Dodge said.

"All these things come together to make us much more confident that our layers of safety have improved to the point where they should review the policy," Dodge said.

FDA spokesman Stephen King said the agency would convene a meeting of its Blood Products Advisory Committee to formally reconsider revising the policy, probably later this year.

Agency officials are "definitely interested in hearing all the science, and if there's hard evidence in place that changing the policy would not endanger the blood supply they're definitely open to it," King said.

The current policy has drawn strong criticism from gay rights groups.

"The blood deferral policy that exists is not based on science. It's based on inertia and in many cases stereotypes," said Jon Givner of the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund. "The FDA should revisit the issue and adopt a deferral policy that is based on actual risk rather than sexual orientation."

