



## RESPONSE TO PETITION

Prepare in English and French marking 'Original Text' or 'Translation'

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PETITION No.: **421-00823**

BY: **MR. DAVIES (VANCOUVER KINGSWAY)**

DATE: **OCTOBER 26, 2016**

PRINT NAME OF SIGNATORY: **THE HONOURABLE JANE PHILPOTT**

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Response by the Minister of Health

SIGNATURE

Minister or Parliamentary Secretary

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SUBJECT

**Blood donations**

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**ORIGINAL TEXT**

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**REPLY**

The Government of Canada is committed to ensuring the safety and quality of Canada's blood supply. Canada is considered to have one of the safest blood transfusion systems in the world due to the combination of comprehensive regulatory oversight, the use of specific donor screening criteria and donor deferrals to prevent higher-risk individuals from donating blood, and the use of state-of-the-art blood testing technology.

In Canada there are no regulations prohibiting men who have sex with men (MSM) and other groups from donating blood. Donor deferrals are policy decisions of the blood operators, Canadian Blood Services (CBS) and Héma Quebec (HQ). Under Canada's *Blood Regulations*, CBS and HQ are required to make submissions to Health Canada for any changes to their processes, including donor screening. Health Canada must evaluate and authorize any changes before they can be implemented. In doing so, Health Canada considers the risks and benefits of the change to potential recipients.

The purpose of the MSM blood donor deferral is to help reduce the risk of transmitting Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C via blood components. The deferral addresses the situation in Canada and the fact that, based on public health surveillance data, the prevalence and incidence of HIV is considerably higher in the MSM population compared to the general population. According to 2014 data from the Public Health Agency of Canada,

48.8% of all reported HIV cases in adults were attributed to the MSM exposure category, which represent approximately 5% of the population.

Despite the advances in blood testing, donor screening and deferral remains a relevant safety measure as it prevents infected units of blood from entering the system, which is safer than retrieving an infected unit once it has been introduced. A combination of donor testing and screening measures is necessary to safeguard Canada's blood system and has been highly effective, with no cases of HIV transmission by blood transfusion in over 25 years in Canada.

In June 2016, Health Canada approved a proposal from the blood operators to change the blood donor deferral period for MSM from a five-year to a one-year deferral period. This deferral policy is in line with several other countries which have implemented or are planning on implementing a one-year deferral period for MSM including the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, France, Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands.

While South Africa does not have an MSM donor screening criteria, the landscape of blood donation and prevalence of HIV in that country is different from Canada. South Africa does not have an MSM deferral as HIV is equally prominent in both the MSM and non-MSM population.

As part of the Government's commitment to review the barriers that prevent men who have sex with men from donating blood, Health Canada is providing a \$3 million contribution to CBS to work in collaboration with HQ. This investment will help fund behavioural research to ensure non-discriminatory practices; an international seminar with health leaders from around the world to discuss blood donor policy, and the development of technologies (such as pathogen reduction technologies) in partnership with industry and academia. The international seminar, which is being organized by CBS and HQ, will be held in January 2017.

As the regulator, Health Canada will consider further changes to the MSM donor deferral policy, including eliminating it, provided that any such submissions from the blood operators contains scientific evidence that demonstrates that the change would not introduce unacceptable risks and that there would be a benefit to Canada's blood system.