

# COLUMBIA SPECTATOR

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Contributor

## Giving Blood When Others Can't

By Averill Leslie

It is Friday afternoon, and I have just now returned from donating blood at the University drive. Giving blood has always been a moment of pride for me—on my 18th birthday it was by giving blood rather than through any other rite of passage that I chose to mark my emergence as an officially recognized member of my civil society. Ever since then I have viewed giving blood as a duty to be embraced.

During this spring's University blood drive, I asked a group of friends whether they would accompany me, either to give blood themselves or just to hold my hand. "I can't give blood," one of them said. "They don't... gay men aren't allowed to give blood. They don't let gay men give blood." And so, I learned that in every practical sense gay men are precluded from donating; the FDA, arguing that gay sex is too likely to result in AIDS or hepatitis, bars any man who has ever engaged in sex with another man from donating blood.

Today as I lay on the cot slowly squeezing a rubber ball to keep my blood flowing out the tube, I could not loosen the image of my friend from my mind: "I can't give blood," he said, "They don't let gay men give blood." I was angry, so angry to know that my friends and neighbors are not allowed to donate alongside me that for the hour after donating I could barely speak. Both from the perspective of human dignity and from the vantage point of being in the midst of a blood shortage, it seems ludicrous to categorically bar homosexual men from donation. Can I describe the level at which it demeans a gay man's personhood to suggest that blind repudiation of him is more important than saving someone else's life? The FDA, it seems, would prefer to perpetuate the false image of gay men as universally promiscuous than to focus on its true mission of protecting the blood supply.

The criterion here is not risky sexual behavior as claimed but sexual orientation. It is outrageous that a man in a 30 year monogamous gay relationship cannot ever be vindicated by testing negative for disease whereas a man having anal sex with a different female prostitute each week will be readmitted to the donor pool by testing negative after one year of abstinence.

Why on earth do we not adopt a more discerning set of criteria that could protect against the risk of disease without falling into unjust and spurious blanket characterizations of whole groups of potential donors? A heterosexual engaging in risky behavior is just as capable of contaminating the blood supply as is a homosexual engaging in risky behavior. The FDA should be concerned not with sexual orientation but with risk.

I am angry too about my own complicity in this discriminatory failure to discern—that I rolled up my sleeve today knowing that I have friends who cannot do the same, that I checked off the “no” box on a question that I do not believe matters rather than standing up and refusing to answer the question at all, refusing to let it frame my act of donation. But how can one boycott a blood drive? How can I let a cancer patient die as the condition for my political statement?

I can't. I gave blood today; I saved a life. And I am bitter about it. It is deplorable that the preservation of life can become a site for enacting discrimination, but that is precisely the situation in which we are currently stuck. Today the blue bandage on my arm seems more a symbol of exclusion than a mark of service. Yes, donate blood, save a life, but do not forget those being barred from the cot next to you. Demand that their blood be recognized as having every bit as much power to save as yours.

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