

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXXX, Number 101, 18 October 2006 – Editorial Clean Blood [ARTICLE]

Editorial

Clean Blood

If you've walked around campus lately, you've probably noticed a lot of blood: blood in John Jay lounge, blood in Uris, blood on College Walk—all of it siphoned off into liter-sized plastic bags ready to be shipped away and transfused into people whose lives depend on it. The fall blood drive is here, and the New York Blood Center, which runs the program, has set up donation stations around campus for this excellent, life-saving cause. But before it will accept your blood donation, the NYBC, like all blood-collection organizations, must screen for a host of things: tuberculosis, syphilis, salmonella, mumps, measles—and homosexuality. You are forbidden from giving blood if you “are a man who has had sex with another man since 1977, even once.” The rationale being that barring members of this group will help prevent the spread of AIDS. Although the intention behind this rule is good the practice is bad because it perpetuates prejudice against homosexuals.

It is understandable that the NYBC would want to prevent HIV-infected blood from entering its system—there are solid, obvious medical reasons for this, most notably the fact that anyone who acquired HIV through blood transfusion would be infected for life and could potentially pass it on to others. The center cannot be faulted for wanting to protect blood recipients. The policy made more sense at its inception, given that AIDS started out primarily in the gay community, and that, in the early days of the disease, monitoring and testing

procedures for injection were virtually nonexistent.

But today, the story is different. AIDS now crosses all gender and sexual-preference boundaries. The rate of transmission for women who have heterosexual sex is higher than that for men who have homosexual sex. Because of this, NYBC asks everyone who enters its doors, gay or straight, if they have ever tested positive for HIV. The fact that they allow straight people to donate but not men who have had sex with men implies that they do not trust homosexuals to tell the truth. Further, HIV testing is standard procedure at the NYBC: all of the blood that flows through its system gets screened, even though its donors all said they had never tested HIV-positive. What is more, within the contemporary gay community, AIDS has become a disease for which people know they need to get tested, so preventing gays from donating blood is not merely prejudicial, but also condescending.

Admirably, the Columbia administration has not remained silent on the issue. The Office of the President recently organized a discussion session to help students understand and question the NYBC's donation rules—a step in the right direction. The University should certainly not prevent NYBC from collecting blood within its gates, nor should students boycott its donation stations. But it is important for NYBC to consider the ramifications of its unfair policy toward homosexuals, and it is equally important for the University community to recognize the issue.