

Challenges of Voluntary Blood Donation in Pakistan

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If a person donates blood without any obligation, it is called voluntary donation, and a person can donate blood at least three times a year. The voluntary donation in Pakistan was merely 1 per cent back in 2005 which has now increased to 10-12 per cent in last 17 years. However, this percentage is meagre/negligible taking into consideration that around 2.5 to 3 million blood bags are annually required to meet the blood needs of children suffering from thalassaemia, patients requiring surgeries and blood transfusion to women during or after childbirth. Around 150,000 bags are monthly required for children suffering from thalassaemia alone in Pakistan. These children require blood transfusion monthly or fortnightly. As voluntary blood donation is very rare in the country, parents of these children run after their relatives, friends and other people to get a bag of blood for their children.

Limited awareness contributes drastically towards the lack of interest of donors. Other limiting factors include tremendous lack of motivation, incentives, recognition and appreciation for voluntary donors. The major portion of our population i.e. women/girls invariably don't qualify to donate due to low HB, underweight and prick phobia. Pakistan has high prevalence of diabetes, hepatitis b & c and HIV thus making many people not eligible to donate blood. Socio-demographic factors like education, gender, age, marital status and residential areas also adversely affect voluntary blood donation. Cultural norms and practices also sometimes discourage voluntary blood donation.

The family and replacement system are just adequate to provide hand-to-mouth blood usage and barely to cover some shortages and emergencies. Rampant misconceptions exist, with 62% of respondents believing that blood donation can result in weakness, needle phobia and transfusion-transmitted infections etc. Fear of the procedure leads to negative attitudes towards voluntary

blood donation. In Pakistan, blood services have developed only as emergency systems.

Unfortunately, the voluntary donors are not regular and are restricted to major cities only, leaving smaller towns and rural areas with insufficient blood supplies. Our Blood Donor Retention Strategy is not able to retain active volunteer donors, recruit new volunteer donors and recover temporarily deferred inactive donors. Other challenges include untrained medical staff, and non-standard blood transfusion equipment. These challenges, while significant, are not insurmountable. Efforts to raise awareness, dispel myths, and improve infrastructure can help address them. Here are some initiatives to enhance voluntary blood donation in Pakistan:

- Creation of awareness regarding misconceptions and benefits of blood donation at colleges/universities level
- Compulsory voluntary blood donation before admission to universities, on application for driving licenses and other similar situations that further alienate potential donors
- Inclusion of a chapter on 'Benefits of Blood Donation' at metric level
- Leveraging online platforms like social /electronic media can connect potential donors with those in need, i.e., Facebook to facilitate connections between donors and recipients
- Organizing community-based blood drives can encourage more people to donate voluntarily. These events raise awareness and make it convenient for individuals to contribute
- Public and private blood collection must focus on well-trained and cheerful staff and a very proactive 'Blood Donor Retention Strategy'

- The voluntary blood donors need to be motivated, recognized, appreciated and awarded as far as feasible. Emphasis must be given on offering some incentives to unpaid donors
 - It is understandable that many voluntary organizations may be limited by funds and support by the government, and even supported by the people. But something can be put in place to make blood donation an enviable movement. We must overcome the challenges from commercial blood donors
 - Implementing mandatory screening of couples before marriage can help prevent thalassemia cases. This proactive approach ensures healthier future generations. It is pertinent to mention that 33% blood is at present consumed on thalassaemia patients. In case of 'Thalassaemia free Pakistan', this blood can be utilized for other diseases.
- Remember, every voluntary blood donation can save lives, especially for children with genetic blood disorders.

Disclosure

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