

Blood donation

In 2022 almost 4000 people took part in the Sex and Prevention of Transmission Study (SPOTS). The survey was open to men (cis and trans) who have sex with men (MSM) and their sexual partners. A major aim of SPOTS was to understand how we can improve blood donation policy for MSM in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Currently in Aotearoa, MSM are not allowed to donate blood if they have had sex (anal or oral) with another man in the last three months. This is called “being deferred” from donating. Recently, some countries like the UK and Canada have changed their policies to allow more MSM to donate, if doing so is safe. The most important safety issue is not increasing the risk of undiagnosed HIV infections entering the blood supply.

For the first time, SPOTS data can provide evidence about blood donation among MSM to inform future policy in Aotearoa.

This is a snapshot of early findings from the study.

Next steps

We'll continue to analyse SPOTS data and will share findings with the NZ Blood Service and community. Ultimately, we want a policy in Aotearoa that strikes a balance that is:

- Safe for people who need blood
- Self-sufficient i.e. collects enough blood for our country's healthcare needs
- More inclusive of people like gay and bisexual men who want to donate blood

SPOTS

Sex and Prevention of
Transmission Study

SPOTS is a collaboration between the University of Auckland School of Population Health, the University of Otago, Burnett Foundation Aotearoa, Body Positive, Te Whāriki Takapou and the NZ Blood Service.

The study is funded by the Health Research Council of NZ and the Ministry of Health/Manatū Hauora.

The SPOTS team wishes to thank everyone who participated in the survey and supported the project.



For updates and to contact the SPOTS team, visit SPOTS.org.nz



**Burnett
Foundation
Aotearoa**



SPOTS

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EARLY STUDY FINDINGS

Blood donation



Who took part?

3838 people aged 16 and over completed SPOTS. This includes MSM, trans women and non-binary people who have sex with MSM. People from all around Aotearoa participated, reporting a wide variety of sexual identities and sexual histories. One in eight (13%) identified as Māori, one in ten (10%) as Asian and one in thirty (3%) as Pasifika. Two out of five (43%) were aged under 30, and one in 22 participants (4.5%) were living with diagnosed HIV.

Donating blood

Four out of five (82%) participants were interested in donating blood, and 43% had donated blood at least once in their life. Reasons participants gave for having donated blood included “I was compliant with the policy at the time” (48%), “I’d never had sex with a man” (29%), “I believed I was at low risk for HIV” (13%), “I was confident the blood screening process would detect any infections” (12%).

In contrast, participants who had never donated blood gave reasons like “I self-deferred i.e. I was aware I was not allowed to donate” (66%), “I was deferred i.e. I tried to donate but was asked not to” (9%), “I’m not interested” (9%).

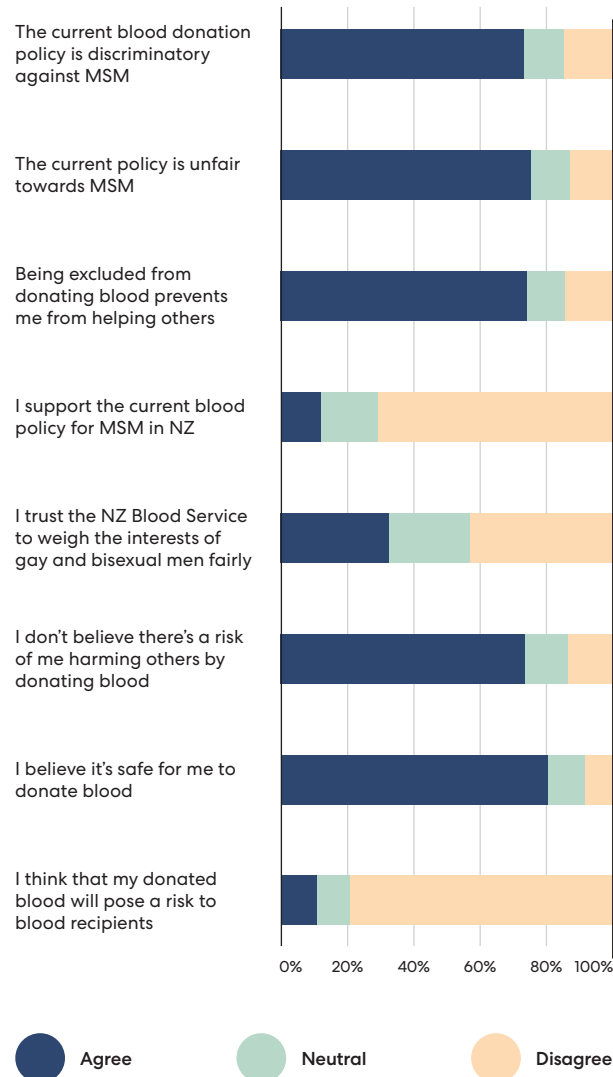
Awareness of current rules

Many participants (71%) are aware of the current blood donation policy (i.e. a 3-month stand-down after anal or oral sex with another man), but a sizeable proportion (29%) were not.

We also asked if participants knew about the rules in relation to recent HIV prevention practices. Few (27%) were aware that you can’t donate blood if you have taken HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) in the last 3 months, but more (79%) were aware that people living with diagnosed HIV could not donate – even if they have an undetectable viral load (UVL).

Attitudes about donor rules

Around three quarters of participants felt the current blood donation policy in Aotearoa is unfair and stops gay and bisexual men helping others. A smaller proportion supported the current policy and felt their blood could potentially harm someone who needed blood.



Quotes

Participants gave a wide range of views about donating blood in the future:

“I have a rare-ish blood type, am fit and healthy, and want to help.”

“It’s a simple way to contribute to society and potentially save a life.”

“I have too many risk factors to feel comfortable about donating blood again.”

“As long as there are discriminatory rules I won’t donate blood.”

“Community service – giving back.”

“I find blood tests hard, so would need to build up courage.”

“I have a long term monogamous partner and I am not going to give up sex for three months just to donate blood. The rules are absolutely ridiculous and insulting.”

Future policy preferences

We ended by asking participants’ preferences for blood donation policy. Most (86%) participants preferred “a more tailored blood donation policy, for example, more detailed personal questions about my behaviour, if it potentially allowed me to donate sooner”.

A minority preferred something similar to the current policy, that did not ask too detailed personal questions.

It’s important to note that a more inclusive policy might not mean that everyone will be able to donate blood.