

US panel fails to make recommendation on gay blood donors

December 4 2014, by Jean-Louis Santini

A panel of experts convened by US health regulators failed Wednesday to recommend whether a lifetime ban should be lifted on gay men donating blood, following two days of heated deliberations.

The US Food and Drug Administration, which takes into account the 17-member committee's suggestions, did not indicate when it would make a decision.

"The meeting provided valuable information and perspectives that will help inform the FDA's deliberations," spokeswoman Jennifer Rodriguez told AFP.

"The FDA's primary concern as we continue to review our blood donation policies will be assuring the continued safety of blood and blood products for the patients who receive these products."

The FDA does not have to follow the panel's advice but typically does.

Some panel members said they were hesitant to change the ban dating back to 1983, despite intense debate in recent years. Others said they favored easing it.

"The blood bank community has looked at the data and feels they can scientifically and medically support the change," said panel member CSL Behring senior medical director Toby Simon.

Others worried that a relaxed policy could increase risk of transmission during blood transfusions.

"Even if this leads to one or two cases of HIV infection, that's not acceptable," said Kenrad Nelson, professor of epidemiology, international health and medicine at the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions.

A growing number of medical and legal experts say that the restrictions are outdated, and that sophisticated tests for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) exist that can make blood donation by gay men a much safer practice.

Opponents of the ban say it stigmatizes gays and dates to a time when the AIDS epidemic was spreading quickly in the gay community, sparking widespread fear about the deadly infection, which was then poorly understood.

Deferral period?

An advisory committee to the Department of Health and Human Services recently recommended replacing the ban with a 12-month deferral period for men who have had sex with men in that time.

In that case, sexually active gay men would still be prohibited from donating blood, but those who have not engaged in sex with other men in the past year would be allowed to donate.

A similar policy is in effect in Australia, Britain and Japan.

A representative from Human Rights Campaign, which lobbies on behalf of the gay community, told the panel Tuesday that relaxing the policy would be a positive step but that the rule should be applied to all people

engaged in risky sex, regardless of sexual orientation.

Still others called for maintaining the ban.

"I urge you to oppose any change," said Peter Sprigg, senior fellow for policy studies at the conservative Family Research Council.

"Unless it can be scientifically proven that a revised policy would result in no increase in risk to the blood supply. Even a small increase in risk is unacceptable," he told the committee.

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