

France to lift ban on gay men giving blood

November 4 2015

France said Wednesday it will lift a ban on gay men giving blood, but only if they abstain from sex in the months beforehand—an exclusion denounced as discriminatory by rights groups.

"Giving blood is an act of generosity, of civic responsibility, and the donor's sexual orientation cannot be a condition," Health Minister Marisol Touraine said in Paris.

Lifting of the ban, introduced in 1983 to halt the spread of AIDS, amounted to "lifting a taboo," she announced, making good on an election promise of French leader Francois Hollande.

At first, donation of "whole blood"—the combination of red cells, plasma and platelets—will be open to gay men who report not having had sex for the preceding 12 months, the minister specified.

For donations of only plasma, the liquid component of blood, donors will be considered if they have not had sex with another man for four months, or were in a monogamous relationship.

Experts will then analyse whether the change in policy has increased risk, after which measures may be relaxed further in 2017, the minister said.

French rights group SOS Homophobie said in a statement that the new measure still amounted to "discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation", as no prerequisite for abstention existed for heterosexual

men or women.

"This does not end the stigmatisation of gay and bisexual men," it said.

Not enough

Jean-Lux Romero, an anti-AIDS and anti-homophobia activist, said the decision "does not go far enough".

"Once again, the focus is on a specific population group rather than on high-risk behaviour—in essence, a stigmatisation of homosexuals," he said.

The issue is a sensitive one in France, where hundreds of people died in the 1980s after HIV-tainted blood was distributed by the national blood transfusion centre.

Much of the contaminated blood was exported, leading to the infection and deaths of hundreds more in other countries.

Several senior civil servants, including the head of the transfusion service, were jailed or fined.

In 1999, then prime minister Laurent Fabius, now foreign minister, and his social affairs minister were cleared of wrongdoing in the scandal. The health minister was convicted but not given a punishment.

Expanding the pool

Mandatory HIV testing of donated blood began in 1985, but antibodies to the virus can take several weeks after infection to develop, during which time someone could test false negative.

Many other countries that have lifted bans on gay men giving blood have also introduced 12-month waiting periods, including Australia, Britain, Japan and Sweden.

US regulators in May recommended lifting a lifetime ban on blood donations by gay men, but also with a 12-month window.

According to the US Food and Drug Administration's website, men who have sex with men are "at increased risk for HIV".

Benoit Vallet, the director-general for health, said the risk of infection from donated blood would be no greater once gay men are included in the donor pool.

As it is, about a dozen donors per year test positive for the AIDS-causing virus in France. This translates into an infection risk of about one per 3.5 million donations.

The last time someone contracted HIV from a blood donor in France was 13 years ago.

Vallet said the lifting of the ban should yield about 21,000 additional donors, and some 37,000 donations, per year—about three days' worth of blood-bank supply.

Some 1.6 million people donated blood in France in 2014.

In April this year, the EU's top court ruled that governments can ban homosexual blood donors if they can show it is the best way to limit the risk of HIV infection.

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