

Ipsos Reid Survey

In the spring of 2012, Canadian Blood Services asked the research firm Ipsos Reid to survey Canadians on the current MSM (men who have sex with men) policy. The current policy excludes MSM from donating blood. This policy was based on scientific evidence that some MSM are in the highest risk group for HIV/AIDS infection. The next two highest categories, according to recent Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) data, are also unable to give blood. Other high risk groups are also permanently deferred. These are injection drug users, persons born or who have lived in an HIV endemic country, and those who have lived with a person at risk for HIV.

For the past several years, Canadian Blood Services has been actively pursuing data that might inform a policy change on MSM. In fact, the board of directors passed a motion in September 2011 committing the organization to re-examine this policy, with a view to reducing this lifetime exclusion to no less than five years and no longer than 10 years – a first step in incremental change on the policy. However, such a change will require the approval of its regulator, Health Canada, and will be subject to ongoing review as additional data emerge and new technologies are implemented.

In support of its' submission to Health Canada, Canadian Blood Services sought to gather the views of a number of stakeholder audiences on their awareness and opinions towards the MSM policy, including support/opposition for this change, and the impact of changing this policy on perceptions of safety, intentions to donate and trust in Canadian Blood Services. The stakeholder audiences included in this research were:

- ⇒ the general public;
- ⇒ active donors;
- ⇒ members of the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) – the national organization that represents the interests of university and college students throughout Canada; and,
- ⇒ members of the Community Based Research Centre (CBRC) – a non-profit charitable organization dedicated to using research to guide community action on health and social issues, with a special focus on Gay Men's Health with initiatives on HIV, sexual health promotion, and policy development.

Following is the Executive Summary of the results from the survey

Awareness of the MSM policy change and effect on donation intentions

- About half of general public respondents are aware (1 in 4 'very' aware) of the current MSM policy on an aided basis. Awareness among the other audiences is significantly higher (7 in 10 among donors and 8 in 10 among CFS and CBRC respondents).
- The current MSM policy has/does not play a major role in general public donation intentions, as 3 in 4 indicate that the policy has had/will have no impact on their donation intentions.

However, this is not the case for CFS respondents as 2 in 3 (66%) have been/are less likely to donate because of it.

Views towards MSM policy change

- There is resounding support for the MSM policy change among the CBRC and CFS audiences with 8 in 10 who feel it is a step in the right direction and who strongly support the change; the majority of donors also support the change (53% right direction and 61% support). General public respondents express moderate support for the change (40% right direction and 45% support) and are most likely to indicate they are undecided. In particular, nearly half (45%) indicate don't know when asked if it is a step in the right or wrong direction (1 in 4 when asked their level of support).
- CBRC and CFS respondents are most likely to provide a reason for thinking the policy change is a step in the *right direction*. In particular, half (50%) of CBRC respondents who indicate this view (and about 4 in 10 among CFS) do so because they feel the policy discriminates against gender and sexual orientation. General public respondents are most likely to say it is because the need for more donors, the discrimination of the policy, and the need for screening and testing (about 1 in 10 for each), while donors are most likely to say it is a step in the right direction because the proper science/research is in place (17%).
 - ⇒ Other commonly mentioned reasons among the CBRC and CFS audiences include: because of the need for blood/donors (15% and 11%, respectively), that there should be screening for safe sex awareness/practices (14% and 11%), that HIV/Aids is not just a gay person's disease (14% for both), and that they are against the ban (14% and 15%). In particular, CFS respondents are most likely to say that the policy is based on outdated science/old stereotypes/fear (15%).
- In terms of reasons for thinking that the change is a step in the *wrong direction*, CBRC and CFS respondents are most likely to say it is because the revised policy still discriminates by gender and sexual orientation (41% and 38%, respectively). On the other hand, donors and general public respondents are most likely to consider it a step in the wrong direction because they are concerned about the risk (46% and 26%, respectively) or because they are against gay people donating blood (13% and 15%).
- Donors and the general public are very similar in their perceptions of safety with respect to this change. About half feel it would either have no impact or a positive effect on safety, while 1 in 5 (among both audiences) feel the impact would be negative. Three in 10 are unsure. Very few CFS and CBRC respondents feel that the change would have a negative impact on the safety of the blood supply.
- In terms of donation intentions, the CBRC and CFS respondents would be most affected if the change were to happen, with about 6 in 10, in both cases, who would be more likely to donate. These respondents are also most likely to indicate that they know people (friends, family

members, or colleagues) who they think would be more likely to donate in the event of the change. Donors are most likely to indicate that the change would have no impact (87%) on their future donation intentions, followed by general public respondents (72% no impact). That being said, younger Canadians – across all audiences – stand out as being more likely to support this change, and to indicate that they would be more likely to donate if it happened. For example, nearly 1 in 5 (17%) general public respondents 18 to 34 years old would be more likely to donate compared to 10 percent among Canadians overall.

Impact of MSM Policy Change on Trust in Canadian Blood Services

- Trust that Canadian Blood Services will do what is best for the blood system and will act in the best interests of the public is high and changes very little following information about the potential MSM policy change. The biggest lift in perceived trust is among CBRC respondents.