

## Boomers Don't Bleed for Their Fellow Man (and Gen X is Even Worse!)

By

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If you look in the mirror and see a blood donor looking back, congratulations! You're a rare and precious bleeder. Of all those commuters honking horns on your daily drive, or milling around the airport before your next flight, fewer than five out of every hundred who meet eligibility requirements actually bother to donate each year, according to the American Association of Blood Banks. It's part of a steady decline in blood givers that persistent efforts of blood-bank recruiters haven't been able to staunch. Yet the dismaying national average seems rosy compared to specific areas like metropolitan New York, which registers a meager 1.5 percent response among its eligible residents.

Even in midwestern cities like Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where blood donations still usually meet demand, there's real concern because the primary donors are already in their 50s and 60s, aging fast, and are now developing age-related conditions that will prevent them from donating in the future. The population groups coming up behind them don't show the same dedication to blood giving that their post-World War II generation did.

Long time blood bankers like Dr. Thomas R. Zuck, director of Hoxworth Blood Center in Cincinnati, put the blame for lower collections on the self-absorbed. Historically, donors tend to cluster in middle-age. "These are now the yuppies," says Zuck, a fit and smiling man of six decades. "The baby boomers have a very different

view of their obligation to society than someone my age. What's important to them is Them. We're seeing that, nationwide."

A recent poll by Louis Harris and Associates backs up Zuck's observation. In a survey conducted for America's Blood Centers, the national network of independent non-profit community blood banks, Harris found that only 46 percent of Americans now report donating blood even once in their lifetime...compared to 51 percent who reported a history of donating in 1996. Far fewer donate repeatedly.

This slippage isn't the kind of news that keeps people up at night, unless, of course, you or a family member needs blood right now. But that possibility may be nearer than you think. The statistics are staggering: every three seconds, someone needs blood—totalling 4 million patients each year. Some 40,000 units are used each day in the US, in surprising amounts per incident: a single auto accident may require 50 units of blood. Heart surgery? 6 units of blood and 6 of platelets—while blood needs for a single organ transplant are estimated at 40 units of blood, 30 units of platelets, 20 bags of cryoprecipitate (a plasma rich in clotting factors) and 25 units of fresh frozen plasma.

So while many Americans live in an bountiful era of can-do medicine, enjoying the illusion that nearly every body-part can be repaired or replaced, this 'progress' has upped the requirements for blood donations substantially. When the Red Cross managed to increase collections by 200,000 units over last year, greater demand for blood products by hospitals offset the gain in collections. It's a growing problem of supply and demand. Linda Levi, director of communications for the New York Blood Center, says her center held three emergency appeals in the first eight months of '98. That 1.5 percent of donors don't donate often enough, she says, although people do turn out to solve a

crisis. “But the bottom line is, not enough people participate in the process. The numbers are declining year after year, and it’s eating away at the bigger pool.”

Media hype doesn’t help, she adds. “People hear about bloodless surgeries, synthetic blood, and other ‘miracles of modern medicine.’ But we’re not there yet. A lot of that is wishful thinking and things in development. We still need donated blood.”

Other resistances include fear of needles, and the slow-dying myth that disease can be contracted by donating. (It’s absolutely false.) Toni Gould, director of communications and marketing for the Michigan Community Blood Centers in Grand Rapids, explains a further misunderstanding: after the devastating tragedies caused by hepatitis and AIDS transmission through blood in the early ‘80s, comprehensive regulations were put into place to assure a safe blood supply. Five levels of safety procedures were instituted: initial eligibility (age 17 or higher, healthy, weight 110 pounds or more), followed by individual screening, lab tests, confidential exclusion of donations, and donor record checks. Individual screening requires a long list of questions on highly personal behaviors, such as sexual practices, that some donors find offensive. “Nobody likes to answer that long list of very personal questions,” she says. It especially irritates regular gallon-donors who’ve been coming into the blood center for years and years. But to maintain today’s excellent level of safety, there’s no way to avoid the unpleasantness.

Overall, the most common excuse for not donating is lack of time and/or inconvenience. The Harris poll found that 32 percent of all eligible donors claimed they were too busy to donate. At the same time, only half of the Red Cross blood donors keep their scheduled appointments in donor centers. No-shows typically blame their harried

lives. That's bad. What's worse? Only 39 percent of eligible Gen X donors (aged early 30s or less) have *ever* given blood, and a whopping 54 percent of this group who did not donate in the last 12 months said donating blood was "inconvenient." This does not bode well for our aging Boomer population, who will have to depend on Gen X'ers to not only keep Social Security alive, but to keep the blood banks full.

What are blood banks doing to entice a new crop of donors? In Milwaukee, Lisa Entrikin, manager of donor recruitment, says her organization is redoing its media campaign, adding more sarcastic humor, eye-catching billboards, and placing radio ads on stations popular with the under-30 crowd.

There is hope, too, residing in the Gen Y kids, those aged under 20. Youth-market surveys indicate this group may be a little more community oriented, more optimistic, cause-committed and multicultural than the older Gen X counterparts. With the right kind of nurturing among high-school and college donors, recruiters may eventually break the pattern of slow but steady decline in blood donations.

Some communities link donations to gifts, and sometimes it works. But in other cases, the gifting becomes a Catch-22. Marsha Terry, spokesperson at Hoxworth, is not especially enamored of the tangible-gift idea. "If giving gifts really worked to bring in donations, I would have quit long ago and we would have just put my salary into T-shirts, but it doesn't work that way," she says. Once a gift is given, the expectation of a gift remains, even when people move to a city where this is not the norm.

Toni Gould notes that giving blood may not seem very high-tech or interesting to young people accustomed to instant gratification and intense stimulation. "And there's no immediate evidence that what you've done is significant," she adds. "It's a regimented

process...and after the blood is collected, and you walk out the door, get in your car, and drive away, you may have a general sense that you've been a good Do-Bee...but it's not like washing your car, where all of a sudden the chrome is sparkling." She stresses that donating blood is a living, dynamic process that doesn't end with the donation...it begins there, by helping someone else live better, live longer.

Gould tells about a local donor who owns a restaurant. He throws pizza parties for his employees: they donate blood and he buys the pizza. He started giving blood because he wanted to make some kind of philanthropic contribution. "I know I'll never be Rockefeller," he said. "I can't sit down and write a big check to build a wing on a hospital. But when I give blood, I don't have to be Rockefeller. I can give something that's priceless."

Marsha Terry puts it another way: "What volunteer activity takes an hour of time, with the potential of saving four lives? A blood donation. It's that simple."

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(Sidebars attached)

Sidebar:

(Subhead) It Takes All Types...

- People over age 65 use 25 percent of all donated blood.
- Healthy individuals can safely donate a pint of blood as often as every eight weeks.

- The most serious blood shortages often occur during summer vacations and winter holidays, when offices close and schools are empty.
- Professional, licensed body-piercings won't prevent a person from donating blood, but any non-professional piercing requires a one year wait. A new tattoo always requires a year's wait.
- Although in the past, whole blood was frequently used in transfusions, now the components are separated promptly after drawing. Red blood cells can be refrigerated for 42 days or stored frozen for up to 10 years. Platelets, which control bleeding for leukemia and cancer patients, are stored at room temperature and last no more than five days. Fresh frozen plasma can be held up to one year, while granulocytes, used in experimental treatments of infections, have a useful span of 24 hours.
- Adult males have roughly 12 pints of blood in their circulation and adult females have about 9 pints. The fluid lost from donation is replenished in about 24 hours, and red blood cells are replaced in a few weeks.
- Some blood groups are associated with particular diseases: peptic ulcer sufferers tend to be Group Os and stomach cancer is more common among Group As.
- The number of red cells in one unit of blood is roughly equal to half the population of the world (2,500 million).
- Most unusual wedding gift: according to the Kansas City Star, Loretta Stewart and Jason Hoover recently asked their wedding guests donate a pint of blood to the Shawnee Mission American Red Cross in honor of their August 12 wedding. "We need stuff to live on," said Stewart. "But the most important thing is knowing we've made a difference."

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(Box) What can you do to help?

- Celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> birthday of the American Red Cross Blood Service with a blood donation party in 1998, or the American Association of Blood Banks' 1999 National Blood Donor Month in January.
- Donate blood, and bring a buddy! Better yet, commit to donate three or four times a year. America's Blood Center locations: 1-888-BLOOD-88, or American Red Cross: 1-800-GIVE-LIFE.
- Encourage your company to sponsor a blood drive.