

Better questions, deeper conversation. Blood donation among the LGBTQIA+ community: a gender-neutral survey

I. Banchini¹; E. Vazzana¹; F. Biscotti¹

¹ APS Arcigay Cassero Salute, Bologna, Italy

Introduction/Summary

- Categorization is an anthropological characteristic that stumbled upon early in the history of human life¹. Although it is a survival technique, it can lead to a misleading stereotyping and to a discrimination among certain groups or minorities, such as the LGBTQIA+ community.
- The questionnaire administered to potential blood donors is the same throughout Italy and is derived from precise instructions from the Ministry of Health. There are, however, some critical points: the terms HIV and AIDS are often used synonymously, some questions are ambiguous and others explore the donor's sexual orientation and do not focus solely on risky sexual behaviors.

Study Design

- In March 2024, we conducted an online survey on the LGBTQIA+ community and blood donation. The survey was gender-neutral; sex at birth and sexual orientation were not asked. It was conducted only on people who identified themselves on the LGBTQIA+ spectrum.
- One of the main objectives of this survey was to determine the proportion of blood donors and non-blood donors within the LGBTQIA+ community and among the non-donors, to identify the primary reasons for their decision not to donate blood.

Methods

- Questions were categorized into two main categories: blood donors and non-blood donors.
- Some questions were proposed both to blood donors and no-blood donors.

The topics that were investigated were many:

- to examine the comfort /discomfort in answering questions about the donor's sexual orientation and to identify possible solutions in providing new approaches to questions about sexual behaviors in the donor questionnaire;
- to analyze the participants' experiences with completing the blood donors' questionnaire and the perception donors have of the blood donor recruitment associations on LGBTQIA+ issues;
- to analyze the use of PrEP by blood donors.

Results

BLOOD DONORS

Blood donors were 33,3% of participants (57/171). Among them, the majority (46%) were between 26 and 35 years old. 53% of donors had been donors from 1 to 5 years.

43,9% (25/57) of blood donors expressed that the blood donation team was fairly prepared for LGBTQIA+ healthcare needs with room for improvement; 33,3% (19/57) expressed that it was not prepared enough.

NON BLOOD DONORS

Non blood donors were 67% (114/171). Among this population, 92% had thought about donating blood (105/114), and among them, 55% (58/105) contacted associations that deal with blood donation, 45% didn't (47/105) We then proceeded to ask to the population that didn't take contact with blood donation associations the main reasons why

Interestingly, 14,9% (7/47) of participants that didn't take contact with any blood donation associations indicated that that was due to their fear of being judged for their sexuality.

Other reasons were health conditions, like pathologies that prevented participants from donating blood/plasma 23,4% (11/47); lack of time (23,4%, 11/47); fear of needles (14,9%,7/47); and other (23,4%, 11/47).

PrEP USERS

The Italian questionnaire has an existing question that could detect a person using PrEP:

[-"Are you taking any medication, under medical prescription or by your own initiative, or any supplements, active ingredients for sporting activities, and other products purchased via internet or outside authorized distribution?"-]

Detection of PrEP use can also be detected by a series of questions on high-risks activities, including sex with a new partner or sex with a sex worker.

As suggested by a recent pilot study in England², a proportion of blood donors may be non-compliant due to their undisclosed PrEP use. Our data show that 84,2% of donors (48/57) declared that they were not asked about PrEP-specific use. Adding a specific question about PrEP use in the donor history questionnaire, although donors are expected to declare this under "use of any medication," including over-the-counter medication, could raise blood supply safety.

COMMON QUESTIONS FOR BOTH GROUPS

We aimed to examine the comfort /discomfort in answering the following question, included in the current questionnaire:

- "Since the last donation or in the last 4 months, have you had heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual intercourse (genital, oral, anal intercourse) [...]"

Out of all the participants (N=171), only 30,4% (52/171) said that they would feel totally comfortable answering that question.

When the same question was reformulated as follows: "Have you had sexual intercourse (anal penetration/vaginal penetration/oral sex) in the last 4 months without using a protection?", the percentage that would feel comfortable answering raised to 51,5% (88/171) (Figure 1)

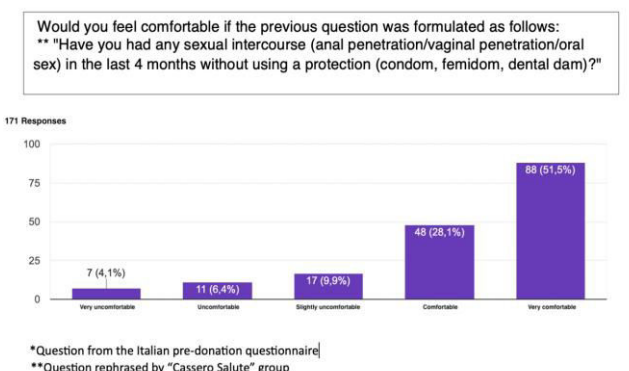
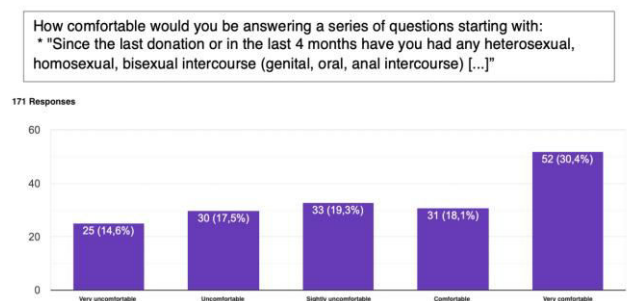


Figure 1: Lack of expression of the type of sexual intercourse can be relevant to increase the comfort levels of donors.

Conclusion

- Overall, 67,3% (115/171) of participants expressed how a stigmatizing language can avert them from blood donation.
- Finding a balance between the safety of the blood supply and the use of non-stigmatizing language to recruit blood donors is challenging. Updating the questionnaire that is administered to blood donors, using inclusive language, and removing questions about a potential donor's sexual orientation could help address these concerns and ensure that donation processes are inclusive, respectful, and conducive to donor comfort and engagement.

References

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2. Harvala, H., Reynolds, C., Ijaz, S., Maddox, V., Penchala, S. D., Amara, A., Else, L., Brailsford, S., & Khoo, S. (2022). Evidence of HIV pre-exposure or post-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP/PEP) among blood donors: a pilot study, England June 2018 to July 2019. Sexually transmitted infections, 98(2), 132-135. https://doi.org/10.1136/sextrans-2021-054981