

Sex Worker Perceptions of the Blood Donations Policy

This briefing is to present evidence around what sex workers think of donating blood and the restrictions imposed upon them, their clients and their personal partners. This evidence will be fed into the current inquiry on blood donations being undertaken by the Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood Tissues and Organs (SaBTO).

Introduction

The number of sex workers in the UK is estimated to be around 72,800 with about 32,000 working in London¹. We surveyed 88 sex workers, 71 of whom were currently working and 17 of whom were retired. In total 87% of respondents described themselves as 'full-service working indoor' sex workers (any kind of sex work that goes on behind closed doors, as opposed to on the street²). We also received responses from street workers, porn performers, non-full-service sex workers and others.



There were three main themes within the survey which looked at the feelings of current and former sex workers about:

1. The Government's rule on sex workers and blood donations.
2. The importance of having a choice to donate blood.
3. The importance of sexual health.

Sexual health of sex workers

There is limited evidence regarding the sexual health practices and incidence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in sex workers. A 2014 study by Imperial College London shows that there were no significant differences in the prevalence of HIV or syphilis between female sex workers and other female attendees³.

However, it did show that female sex workers were more likely to be diagnosed with chlamydia and gonorrhoea. For male sex workers, some evidence suggests that they have higher rates of STIs compared to other men attending GUM clinics⁴.

The Government's rule

The current rule on blood donations, taken from the Government's blood donation website⁵, state:

1. *That you must never give blood or platelets if you have ever received money or drugs for sex.*
2. *You must never give blood if you have ever injected, or been injected with, drugs; whether a long time ago or only once. This includes body-building drugs and injectable tanning agents.*
3. *You must not give blood or platelets for at least 12 months after sex:*
 - *If you are a man who, in the last 12 months has had oral or anal sex with another man (even if you used a condom or other protective).*
 - *If you have a partner who is, or you think may be:*
 - a. *HIV positive*
 - b. *A hepatitis B carrier*
 - c. *A hepatitis C carrier*
 - d. *HTLV positive (Human T-Cell Lymphotropic Virus-1)*
 - e. *Syphilis positive*
 - *If you have a partner who has ever received money or drugs for sex.*
 - *If you have a partner who has ever injected, or been injected with, drugs.*
 - *If you have a partner who has, or you think may have been, sexually active in parts of the world where HIV/AIDS is very common.*

What our survey respondents thought of the Government's rules

Respondents were more aware of the Government's rules relating to themselves than they were to rules which affect their clients donating blood (see above).

Altogether, 51% of respondents were aware of the Government's rule that anyone who has ever worked as a sex worker is banned for life from donating blood.

In total 89% of respondents disagreed with the rule that current sex workers are banned and 92% disagreed with the rule that former sex workers are subject to a total lifetime ban on donating blood.

A total of 61% of respondents suggested that former sex workers should have a deferral period introduced which would be in line with other current deferral periods, for example for men who have sex with men (MSM). Altogether, 85% felt that if either former- or current- sex workers did not have any health issues then there should be no ban, regardless of their sex work.

'I think this rule is outdated, as sex workers are generally much less likely to carry bloodborne STIs as they are screened regularly AND are better informed regarding STIs than the general public (who can often be much more carefree about their sexual health choices).'

In contrast, only 32% of respondents were aware of the Government's current rule that clients of sex workers are banned from giving blood for 12 months following sex with a sex worker – 92% of respondents disagreed with this ban.

'I feel that it is unfair that sex workers and clients are treated differently, as both are engaging in the same transaction of sex for money. I feel that whatever ban is decided upon (12 months or lifetime) it should be applied to both clients and sex workers.'

A mere 18% of respondents were aware that this same 12-month ban on giving blood also applied to sexual partners in the private life of someone who has ever worked as a sex worker.

Despite the Government's rule, only 22% of respondents had never tried to donate blood because of their awareness of the rule, while 16% had given blood without mentioning their occupation.

'The policy should be based on scientific evidence, not ignorant, ill-informed and puritanical opinions based on stigma.'

The importance of having a choice to donate blood

Most respondents (61%) stated that it was 'very important' to them to be able to donate blood if they chose to and if there was no existing health reason why they should not. They reasoned that they:

- **Get tested regularly and so know they aren't posing a threat:** *'I donated blood before I started working and I would like to still be able to give blood. I'm fastidious about my sexual health and I get tested regularly. It saddens me to think that I will always be banned from donating blood.'*
- **Want to help and to give back:** *'I am alive and well thanks to the blood transfusions I received after a car accident. I would like to give back. My blood is just as useful as anyone else's and it goes to waste because of baseless hysteria that goes against actual epidemiological studies and it contributes to stigma.'*
- **Always use condoms and believed that they are at less risk than the general public:** *'We are prevented from doing so due to stigma and assumptions about our sexual health. The assumption is that we have poor sexual health, yet the reality is that sex workers are very cautious about sexual health – at work I use condoms for oral and penetrative sex, and I undergo a full sexual health test every six weeks.'*
- **Another sex worker voiced her frustration about having a rare blood type yet being unable to donate:** *'Donated blood saves so many lives. As someone of a black ethnic background with a fairly rare blood type I hate that I cannot help.'*

The importance of sexual health

The vast majority (81%) of respondents who are still sex workers had not had condomless sex with a client in the last 12 months, and 40% said that they take the same levels of precaution in their private and professional lives. In addition, 76% of respondents attend a sexual health clinic or GP surgery for a sexual health check-up at least once every three months. In total 98% of respondents knew their HIV and hepatitis B status with 93% knowing their hepatitis C status.

Additionally, 98% of respondents rated their sexual health as being 'very important'. Key themes included that they:

- Do not wish to pass any infection on to others – clients, clients' partners or their own private partners: *'I'm aware that I'm coming into close contact with multiple partners so I mitigate the risks as best I can – contracting an STI and potentially infecting others is not something that I would ever want. I have monthly tests at the GUM, use condoms with all my clients and have been vaccinated against hep B.'*
- Placed importance on being healthy to continue to work: *'My sexual health is THE most important thing in my business! Of course I'm going to look after my money-maker. Not being healthy would destroy my business. I never take chances. I haven't had sex without a condom for 25 years, including before I became a sex worker. Since starting sex work, I've never had unprotected sex.'*
- Saw their sexual health as part of their general health: *'My health is important to me as a whole. My sexual health is part of that. It's also my job to maintain my sexual health so I can work, and work responsibly.'*

Conclusion

The responses to this survey overwhelmingly indicate that sex workers are not happy with the Government's current rules on sex work and blood donation. They recognise it as being inequitable, unscientific and stigmatising.

Respondents want to be able to give blood. The vast majority of current and former sex workers do not feel that their occupation puts them at a greater risk of STIs or bloodborne viruses compared to the general population. Most respondents felt that their sexual health practices are stricter than those of the general public and therefore they feel that they pose a lesser risk than non-sex workers who are allowed to donate blood.

There is no definitive evidence to say all sex workers are at an increased risk of HIV and other bloodborne, sexually transmitted viruses. If the Government is to truly deliver an evidence-based blood donation policy it must invest in research to specifically look at the prevalence of HIV and blood-borne sexually transmitted viruses in current and former sex workers. This research must look at the specific circumstances of the many types of sex work that occurs across the country.

Our opinion is that from the evidence this survey provides, we would advocate for a change to the current lifetime ban on donating blood that both current and former sex workers are subject to.

We would suggest abolishing the lifetime ban for former sex workers. We also believe that the deferral period for current sex workers should be brought in line with the updated deferral period for MSM. For example, if the deferral period for MSM is reduced to four months, then for current sex workers, they would need to have stopped sex work or taken a break from sex work for four months prior to donating blood. This deferral period of four months should be the same for sex workers clients and partners.

¹ www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/26/26.pdf

² <http://sexworkersproject.org/downloads/BehindClosedDoorsES.pdf>

³ <http://sti.bmj.com/content/90/4/344>

⁴ <http://sti.bmj.com/content/90/1/38>

⁵ www.blood.co.uk/who-can-give-blood