

Blood Donation: Bridging the Gap between Need and Supply

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Abstract

We live in the era of social media. Social media is used for marketing daily needs to luxury items and for services essential in all fields of life. It had literally brought world on a click. Even then Social media is minimally used for life saving services like blood donation awareness and supply. Voluntary blood donation is limited to the blood donation camps and for nearest relatives in need. There is generalized lack of knowledge regarding blood donation among people and social media can be a very important source of information in creating awareness about blood donation, particularly among youngsters. In times of need, most patients, their family members and relatives are in stress to find donors. They do this either by directly talking to known people or through other alternatives such as social media. According to WHO, there should be a provision for safe and adequate blood supply in national health care policy and infrastructure of every country. The gap between need and supply needs to be filled up. The COVID-19 pandemic has added on to the already existing shortage of blood donors. This article discusses the motivational factors as well as barriers to blood donation, at the same time analyzing the use of social media for the same.

Keywords: blood donation awareness, social media, barriers, COVID-19

Every year millions of lives are lost worldwide due to non-availability of blood transfusion and blood products. Blood can save lives of people suffering from life-threatening diseases and blood disorders as well as gives them a new lease of life. Several surgeries require immediate blood transfusion. Even in maternal and perinatal care, it has a life-saving role. Blood transfusion is still an important therapeutic intervention in patients who have sickle cell disease. This will help in easing disease symptoms and also prevents complications. According to WHO report, many countries are not having adequate supply of safe blood and are facing the challenge of making blood available at the same time ensuring its quality and

safety¹. The Medical Journal the Lancet (November 18, 2019) reported that India had the world's largest shortage of blood with all states facing an enormous shortfall of 41 million units and demand exceeding the supply by over 400%. Even in Western countries, there is a decrease in number of donors². Bringing in new donors and retention of the old ones is also necessary³. From time to time, new donors need to be recruited but this is also more cost-intensive than retention of the loyal donors⁴. The world is seeing an increase in transfusion-transmitted infections among paid donors⁵. Hence the World Health Organization and the Council of Europe recommended that blood and blood components be collected only from voluntary, unpaid repeat donors which will help in assisting the blood banks to manage and schedule transfusion smoothly⁶.

It is of utmost importance to understand the motivational as well as donation barriers for donors and non-donors. Some think that donating blood reduces masculinity in males. Women feel they cannot donate blood as it would make their immune system weak. Menstruation is also brought in by many as an unnecessary issue. It is generally seen that women have a low hemoglobin, hence they stay away from blood donations. Initially nearly one-third of the blood supply was from paid donors. People who were having communicable diseases also frequently turned up for paid donations. Now, with the ban, the government as well as private hospitals are affected. But this ban has also prevented unsafe blood donations.

Initial researches showed that most frequently reported reasons for blood donation for the first time was the influence of a friend⁷. Another study investigated the motivation and socio-demographic factors important for the development of a long-term commitment for being a voluntary, non-remunerated blood donor. Altruism and empathy; social reasons like influence of friends and family; improving one's self-esteem; positive experiences associated with donation; and a moral obligation to donate were the factors identified⁸. This study also found that altruistic motives for donation were strong and similar in long-time and short-time donors. On the contrary, strengthening their self-esteem was the main motivation in short-time donors⁸. Another study in Saudi Arabia showed that higher knowledge and positive attitude towards blood donation motivated people and factors like having one day off and mobile blood donation caravans in malls, plazas, and streets influenced people to donate blood⁹. Sometimes in spite of being well informed, very few people donate actively, hence information campaigns should focus on "need" rather than altruism for better results to recruit new blood donors and also to convert occasional donors to active

donors¹⁰. Poor treatment, poor staff skills, and a bad experience were the main reasons why donors do not return to donate¹¹. Also prolonged queuing times are negatively correlated to blood donation satisfaction¹². A study done in Netherlands to find out barriers to blood donation showed remuneration of the blood bank's top management was the most frequently mentioned donation barrier. But this could be specific to Netherlands¹³. Others identified medical reasons, sexual risk behavior, and donation location as donation barriers¹⁴. According to yet another study, education and also place of employment had a greater role to play in motivating people to donate blood¹⁵. Hence, a well-organized donation management needs to be in place, which would help in donor motivation and increase the availability of blood bags.

In 2018, a study in Germany done on consecutive donors reported that social media motivated 7.4% of the donors, mainly the young and female donors. Social media included "Facebook" and "Jodel" which was the German local mobile application. Social media was seen as the second most important motivator to recruit new donors beside relatives and friends who were the main motivators for first time donors¹⁶. Other studies have found time constraints and physical reactions to be the primary donation barriers^{17,18}. The most important incentive to donate blood was human solidarity whereas health condition was the main inhibitor¹⁹.

COVID-19 crisis has affected all sectors of the country including the blood banks as well. Social distancing requirements and lockdown has made it difficult for voluntary donors to reach the blood banks for donating blood. Worse hit by the lockdown during this phase are thalassemia patients who need blood transfusion every two weeks. Thalassemia patients have severe shortage of hemoglobin due to their inherited blood disorder. The only lifesaving option is blood transfusions. Since a few years, the social media is seen as an emerging connectivity in reaching people at times of need. Studies before 2010 indicated that nonprofit organizations have not been able to use websites as strategic, interactive stakeholder engagement tools²⁰. Initially people did not have much knowledge about social sites, their interactive features, feedback and discussion channels. People feared their privacy on these sites. Usage by common man was less. In recent times, with the rapid development in technology as newer and smaller devices for communication are being introduced, the accessibility of social networks from any place and at any time has become easier. Some of these include pocket computers, laptops, iPads and even simple mobile phones with internet support²¹. In the past few years, there has also been a massive change

in the features of social networking sites. Initially people did not have the knowledge of creating interactive sites with feedback options and discussion boards. Facebook and twitter have done away with this excuse. These have paved a way for free and interactive features. Any organization, anywhere in the world, big or small can create a site and build its network of friends and followers with almost real-time contact. Today social media has become an important online platform for people and organizations²². Social networking sites unite huge number of people on the same platform for the achievement of specific goals. This brings positive change in the society. Social media provides awareness among society like campaigns, advertisement articles, promotions which helps the society to be up to date with the current information²³.

In 2019, a study in Saudi Arabia indicated that social media had been used to search for blood donors and the preferred social media to transmit and receive information was WhatsApp followed by twitter, snapchat, instagram and facebook. The source of the post who requested blood donation were mainly from friends and family members¹⁹. Thus social media can be of great help to improve blood donation practices. Social media and their networking can play an influential role in promoting blood donation activity through educational activities. But it is also necessary to filter out the fake as well as old circulating messages. Also whatever people read online, it is generally seen that they trust more and pay attention to the negative than positive information given on social media²⁴. Also people confirm to information coming from peers rather than from institutions²⁵. Thus social media plays a dual role- acts as an opportunity as well as a threat to stable donor pool.

Using the new interactive features of social media, speed of communication, millions within reach, messages on social media need to be tailored so that it reaches the right people. To meet the growing demand of blood transfusion, the government needs to address the various lacunae in its system. Education, motivational and recruitment strategies should focus on the myths and misconceptions related to blood transfusion. Awareness campaigns should be planned in schools and colleges which need to promote the benefits of blood transfusion. Campaigns can also focus on thanking people who donated blood and also encourage others to donate. A good donor data base can be built and social media can be used wisely to connect the future donors. The whole process of blood donation should be made a user-friendly system. More and more people should come forward and take it up as their individual responsibility to donate blood and make this world a healthier place.

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