

Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP  
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care  
Department of Health and Social Care  
39 Victoria Street  
London  
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OPEN LETTER: Published 14 June 2021

Dear Secretary of State,

We are writing to express our deep disappointment that the Department for Health and Social Care has decided not to implement a recent SaBTO (Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs) recommendation pertaining to blood donation policy in England.

From 14 June 2021, new rules will mean that more gay and bisexual men than ever before will be able to give blood with no consequence to the safety of the blood supply. This is because we will be moving to a more individualised approach to risk assessment. However, the excitement around this moment is significantly dampened by failure to make progress in other aspects of the eligibility criteria that impose damaging and unfair restrictions that disproportionately affect certain groups, particularly where the evidence base has been established to support change and there are no legislative restrictions.

Current eligibility criteria states that you cannot give blood if in the past three months you have had sex (even with a condom) with *“partner who has, or you think may have been, sexually active in parts of the world where HIV/ AIDS is very common. This includes most countries in Africa.”*<sup>1</sup> This question has required review for some time. It is vague, difficult for both health professionals and potential donors to interpret, let alone, answer (countries where HIV is ‘common’ are not defined or listed). The reference to Africa (not the only continent with countries with higher HIV prevalence) is misleading, perpetuates stereotypes and an overly simplistic understanding of travel related HIV risks. It also disproportionately impacts on Black people in the UK, particularly those of Black African background.

NHS Blood and Transplant (NHSBT), based on the work of the FAIR (For the Assessment of Individualised Risk) steering group, provided evidence to SaBTO to support this question being removed without impacting on the safety of the blood supply. Other questions related to sexual health risk and travel related risks are more than sufficient to identify and defer higher risk individuals. FAIR also identified that the question created mistrust in Black

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from NHSBT blood donation website, ‘Who can give blood’, guidance for the general public:

<https://www.blood.co.uk/who-can-give-blood/>

communities.<sup>2</sup> This is at a time where NHSBT is actively promoting blood and tissue donations amongst Black communities in the UK, including through partnership with member organisations of the One Voice Network.

SaBTO, which applies a high level of scientific scrutiny, has accepted the recommendation, and passed this on to your office at DHSC for a final decision.<sup>3</sup> We had therefore expected this to be implemented alongside other changes to the eligibility criteria on World Blood Donor Day.

As FAIR steering group members and NHSBT stakeholders, who have partnered on promotion of the changes ahead of 14 June and on promoting donations in the Black community, we have been informed that DHSC did not think it was in a position to accept the recommendation despite SaBTO endorsement. No explanation has been provided and considering the scientific evidence backs the change as does NHSBT, which would be responsible for implementation, we see no reason for the change not to be implemented. With the evidence provided to SaBTO, the equalities impact of this policy remaining in place is concerning and it is not clear if DHSC has done any equalities impact assessment in making this decision.

**We ask for you to urgently reconsider this decision – we believe there is still an opportunity for this to be made by World Blood Donor Day or soon after.** It is deeply disappointing to see such progress on ensuring the rules are fairer for some marginalised groups, while failing to do so for others when there are no clear obstacles for doing so. If there are barriers to you making this decision, we ask that clear and public explanation is provided on them and that you work with us to overcome them as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,



**Deryck Browne**  
Chair  
One Voice Network



**Deborah Gold**  
Chief Executive  
National AIDS Trust



**Ian Green**  
Chief Executive  
Terrence Higgins Trust

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<sup>2</sup> Minutes of the 42<sup>nd</sup> meeting of SaBTO, Part 1, 29 March 2021, accessed at:

<https://app.box.com/s/m6or0zdspah90u6kg3r9/file/814539439945>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.