

Direct donor-patient blood transfusion to be legalized

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NEW DELHI

In a major step to address the shortage of blood in India, the Drug Technical Advisory Board (DTAB) will on Thursday legalize the direct transfer of blood to a patient from a suitable donor in India.

At present, the Drugs and Cosmetic Rules (1945) authorize collection of blood only by licensed blood banks, in effect making the so-called unbanked directed blood transfusion (UDBT) illegal.

But India has only 2,545 licensed blood banks, most of which are in the cities, a factor that plays a huge role in the deaths of pregnant women and road accident victims, according to health activists and rural surgeons who have been campaigning for legalizing UDBT.

Drug Controller General of India (DCGI) G.N. Singh confirmed the decision.

"We have called a meeting and UDBT is the main agenda," Singh said. "Everyone has agreed in principle. The issue has been flagged by the health ministry several times and we have taken this very seriously this time. The idea is that no one in India should go without blood. Since this does not require amending the Act, we are hoping to implement this rule at the earliest."

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), a country needs a minimum stock of blood equal to 1% of its population. This means while India needs 12 million units of blood a year, only nine million units are collected.

Indian law currently allows UDBT only for the armed forces. In 2001, the government amended the rule in the D&C Act to allow Armed Forces Medical Services to conduct UDBT in case of emergencies.

"We have for long argued that the life of rural woman is as precious as a soldier's. There is a need for UDBT because our health system is not robust enough to meet demands in rural and semi urban areas," said Amit Sen-gupta, a health activist from the Jan Swasthya Abhiyan health movement. "There is a need for UDBT, especially in areas where no blood bank can be accessed within an hour. This method consists of transfusing the blood from a donor, matching it after testing for pathogens and transfusing it directly to the patient. This is as safe as banked blood transfusion if all the mandatory tests (including for HIV) are done," he said.

Direct, unbanked blood transfusions were allowed in India till 1998, when the government amended the D&C Act to curb HIV transmission. If allowed again, doctors will be able to screen blood for infections without banking or storage, and transfuse it directly to a patient.

Regulatory