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Canada's blood system: from Bust to Trust

GRAHAM SHER

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Today marks the 10th anniversary of the parliamentary tabling of the report of the Commission of Inquiry on the Blood System in Canada, led by Mr. Justice Horace Krever. The report chronicled the events surrounding Canada's tainted blood tragedy of the 1980s and early 1990s, arguably the worst public-health crisis in Canada's history. In September, 1998, it led to the establishment of Canadian Blood Services as the new steward of Canada's blood system for all provinces and territories except Quebec. Broad trust in Canada's blood system has since been restored.

Judge Krever's report recognized the need for major systemic and behavioural changes. It spelled out clear operating principles for a new system: The safety of the blood supply comes first; donated blood is a public resource; the organization must act in the best interest of all Canadians and operate in an open manner.

We inherited a collection of 16 blood centres, each operating largely in isolation of the others. In those early years, if not for a remarkable group of dedicated employees, there would not have been a blood system at all. Together, we embarked on a transformation journey — to create a single, national, integrated system. Change did not mean tinkering around the edge; it meant radically redesigning the entire service delivery model and reforming the underlying culture.

As we began to rebuild, we focused first on the safety and adequacy of the blood supply. We placed an enormous emphasis on the safety infrastructure — new tests and equipment — and within a few years, the Canadian blood system was as advanced as any other in the developed world. By 2001, Canadian Blood Services had state-of-the-art testing facilities and we could claim that the risk of an infection being transmitted by a unit of blood in Canada was amongst the lowest in the world.

Internet Links

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Simultaneously, we had to deal with a drastically reduced donor base. A decline in blood donations meant that, at times, we met only 60 per cent of hospital demand. Not infrequently, hospitals cancelled surgeries and postponed cancer treatments as a result. But with enormous effort, we turned around a decade-long decline in donation, to the point where we now meet almost 100 per cent of the constantly growing hospital demand on a consistent basis.

While these major changes were difficult and affected a large number of stakeholders, we did not shy from making them. Instead, we embraced change and engaged stakeholders in every step of the journey — whether through our National and Regional Liaison Committees, where patient groups, donors, health-care professionals and partners participate in the decision-making, or through our international Consensus Conferences, where the world's foremost medical and scientific minds frequently advance international guidelines.

We have adopted several leading engagement practices, such as Syntegration, to involve our stakeholders in the decision-making, and employed the "balanced scorecard" management system to monitor and improve performance on all key corporate measures, including transparency. Today, thanks in part to the systems put in place through the foresight of Judge Krever, the organization is in a position to branch out into new, but complementary lines of business. Recognizing our expertise, and leveraging our national infrastructure, provincial and territorial governments are looking to Canadian Blood Services to take on leading national roles in the field of umbilical cord blood banking, and organ and tissue donation and transplantation — all undertakings that would have been inconceivable 10 years ago.

Our goal in the early days was to become the leading blood operator in the developed world, and by most measures we have achieved that goal. Our new vision, while remaining firmly committed to continuous improvement of the blood system in Canada, is to become a leader in integrated health-care delivery in the country. Through the dedication of our employees and volunteers, our focus on safety and operational excellence, the commitment of our stakeholders and a resolute focus on openness and transparency, this vision is well on its way to becoming a reality.

In the end, however, there would be no blood system were it not for donors.

These pillars of the community should be proud of the role they have played in rebuilding the blood system. Judge Krever recognized the importance of maintaining an adequate supply and it is only through support from individuals, communities and corporations that we are able to meet the ongoing needs of patients. We should never lose sight of the fact that the "raw material" for the life-saving treatments we provide doesn't come from a tree, and cannot be fabricated in a lab. Rather, as our tagline so powerfully reminds us: It's in us to give.

Graham Sher is chief executive officer of Canadian Blood Services.

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