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Editorial: Donate blood often to keep supplies up

Pool of eligible donors is smaller, so giving is more important.

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When people are called to deliver, they deliver -- as Minnesotans have in so many ways since the Interstate 35W bridge collapse. Indeed, many do so on their own, with no call required.

When it comes to blood donations, it has become clear that more will have to step up on their own in a pretty regular fashion if all who need transfusions are to get them. As a recent story by Maura Lerner reported, University of Minnesota researchers have found that the number of eligible U.S. blood donors -- about 111 million, or about 37 percent of the population -- is much smaller than previously estimated. The reason: Protections put into place to protect the safety of donors and recipients.

Factors that exclude potential donors have multiplied since the AIDS crisis began two decades ago and new rules were adopted. But as Dr. Jeffrey McCullough, leader of the U of M study, told the Star Tribune, "Nobody ever pauses to step back and look at the impact of all of these."

On the policy level, the rules have to err on the side of safety. But guidelines should routinely be reassessed to see whether they should be loosened in some way or tightened in another.

On a more personal level, the list of exclusionary factors -- from being HIV-positive to being on a blood-thinning regimen to having just returned from a country with a high incidence of malaria -- has reduced the pool of donors to the point where all healthy people should consider going to a collection center, answering the various questions and finding out if donating is permitted. Often collection sites are set up at work, at a church or other convenient place.

The key, though, is this: Once you have become a blood donor and see how easy it is to do it, you need to keep donating on a regular basis. According to the American Red Cross, a constant supply of donations is important because blood has a shelf life of just 42 days. The shelves need constant replenishment if blood banks are to be ready not only for estimated needs but for emergencies.

Some blood centers have had to increase their marketing efforts and create incentives. But now that Minnesotans have been thinking anew about the need, let's collectively pledge to do it -- either for the first time, or more often. If you're 17 or older and healthy, you can donate several times a year.

And if you're squeamish, do as the blood centers advise: Relax in the chair and think of the recipients.

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