

## **FINDING RARE DONORS**

Blood centres may test blood donors for certain rare blood types in the following circumstances:

- A patient with a long-term illness like cancer or Sickle Cell Disease may require ongoing supply of a particular rare blood type.
- There is an overall shortage of a specific rare blood type.
- A community has a high percentage of African-American, Asians or other ethnic minorities among its population. It needs to be able to supply the rare blood types found more frequently among those groups.

## **WE'RE COUNTING ON YOU**

Because blood types are inherited, a person with a rare blood type may have family members with that same rare type. In fact, the chances are one in four that the brothers or sisters of a person with a rare blood type will have the same rare blood type. In such cases, the family members may be approached by the blood centre to be typed and join the National registry, and the *International Rare Donor Program*.

Most blood donors can give blood as often as every eight weeks. We depend on rare donors to give blood regularly. Each precious bag of rare blood can be frozen in long term storage facilities for up to 10 years., so it will be available for patients as needed. Perhaps most important of all, please donate when you are contacted, if you are able. If we ask, it means that your blood is needed urgently.

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

To learn more about rare donors and the *International Rare Donor Program*, please contact your local blood centre or access the internet.

<http://www.isbtweb.org/working-parties/rare-donors>

**If the International Rare Donor Program is new to you, please read this brochure. It explains what the Program does and why finding rare donors is such an important mission for all involved with the Program.**

**The International Rare Blood Donor Program assists in finding and matching rare blood for patients with specific needs. People with rare blood depend on each other. You should be listed in the program.**

To understand why rare blood donors are so important, it helps to know why certain blood types are rarer than others.

## **ABOUT RARE BLOOD**

Your blood contains red blood cells, and on the surface of those cells are protein substances called "antigens". Your red blood cells may carry many different antigens that are inherited. Whether you have a certain blood type depends on whether or not your red cells have a particular antigen.

There are more than 600 antigens known today, and more are discovered each year. The familiar antigens are those of the ABO blood type. For example, if you have A blood, your red cells are carrying the A antigen. Likewise, people with the B antigen have type B blood, people with neither the A nor the B antigen have type O blood, and those with both the A and B antigens have type AB blood.

Other antigens are less familiar, because they are found in very few people's blood. Sometimes the reverse is true. There are some antigens that most of us carry on our red cells but that a few people's red cells lack — their blood is said to be “negative” for those antigens.

Your blood type is considered rare if only one person in 500 or more lacks the same antigens you have. If only one in 1000 or more people lack your antigen, your type is considered very rare.

Obviously, the rarer a person's blood type, the more difficult the circumstances if that person suddenly needs matched rare blood for a transfusion. The Program strives to make sure that rare blood is available for anyone in need. That's why we urge everyone with a rare blood type to join the International Rare Blood Donor Program via your local or national registry.

**WHY AN INTERNATIONAL PROGRAM?** When a patient must receive rare blood for a transfusion, time is of the essence, because the blood is usually needed that day or night. Finding rare blood used to be a time-consuming ordeal. At any given hospital or blood centre, requests for rare blood were relatively infrequent, so each facility had to find rare donors on its own when the need arose.

To assist in the supply of rare blood, the *International Panel of Rare Blood Donors* also called the *International Donor Panel (IDP)* was established in 1965 by the ISBT. The day to day running of the IDP is assigned to the WHO International Blood Group Reference Laboratory (IBGRL) in Bristol, UK.

The role of IBGRL is to compile information on rare donors that have been identified at other centres around the world and to make this information available when rare blood is needed. In addition to the donor information the addresses of the centres and telephone, fax and e-mail addresses of contact personnel are kept up to date. Requests for rare blood can be co-ordinated by IBGRL staff when required. There are more than 5,000 donors from 56 centres in 26 countries on the IDP.

## **HOW IT WORKS**

When a local blood centre or national registry is unable to provide the rare blood required for a patient, the IDP is contacted. Program personnel search the computer database for rare donors whose blood type matches that of the patient. Once a facility with donors who have that blood type is found, the facility is asked to send matching rare blood if already on hand, or to call-in rare donors to donate the needed blood. The facility that fulfils this request sends the blood to the requesting centre or hospital.

Many requests are filled within 24 hours, particularly if the responding blood centre has access to rare blood in frozen storage. If a rare blood donor must be called to come in to donate, time is needed to collect, test and ship the blood.

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