

Club 25: Reaching young blood donors

Young people, who tend to be healthy, idealistic and motivated, are an excellent pool of potential voluntary unpaid blood donors. Recruiting and retaining youth donors not only improves the long-term safety and sufficiency of a country's blood supply, but can also reduce the prevalence of HIV/AIDS by promoting safe lifestyles among young people.

The "Club 25" concept (also known as "Pledge 25 Club" or "Pledge 25"), first launched in Zimbabwe in 1989, has proven to be a remarkably effective and relatively inexpensive way of targeting youth donors. In the original programme, students pledged to donate blood 25 times by the time they reached the age of 25; the commitment now varies depending on the country. For example, Club 25 members in Malawi (aged 16–25) pledge to donate blood at least 25 times in their lifetime; in South Africa, the pledge is to donate 20 times by the age of 25.

Part of the pledge is to maintain a healthy lifestyle in order to provide the safest blood. Club 25 members are also encouraged to educate their peers (and other members of the community) on safe behaviour, thus adding health promotion to their contribution to the community.

The philosophy behind Club 25 is to be open and honest with young people, providing clear guidelines about blood donation criteria and facts about the best HIV/AIDS protection based on the evidence available, and then allowing young people to make their own choices.

This philosophy is working: in Zimbabwe—where about 70% of the blood collected is from students—the HIV infection rates among blood donors fell from 4.45% in 1989 to 0.35% in 2005, when the infection rate in the sexually active population was 21.3%. Strong Club 25 programmes—where youth benefit from up to 10 years of positive reinforcement and education regarding their HIV negative status—have the potential to spawn a generation of HIV negative adults.

Several countries in addition to Malawi, South Africa and Zimbabwe have established a Club 25 or similar youth donor club, including Bangladesh, Botswana, Haiti, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Swaziland, Togo, Uganda and Zambia. Experience has shown that successful youth donor clubs require:

- High-level support;
- Adaptation of the concept as appropriate for each country's unique situation;
- Careful planning prior to implementation;
- A dedicated budget;
- A dedicated, responsible and committed staff member;
- Support and commitment from youth, who should drive the programme;
- Constant monitoring and evaluation.

While the initial planning and development process for a Club 25 may be more time- and resource-consuming than for traditional "top-down" approaches such as advertising campaigns—Zimbabwe's programme, for example, was developed through an intensive, long-term, peer-based participatory process—the extra effort should be well justified by the outcome.

Club 25 ... Where blood donors love life!

For more information about Club 25, please visit <http://www.ifrc.org/youth/>