Feature

The Malawi Success Story

In a very short time Malawi has been able to implement the strategy for blood safety and availability advocated by the World Health Organization and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, thus saving many lives.

With an HIV incidence of 14.4%, Malawi is home to almost two million HIV positive people among its 12 million population. In addition, 8.1% of Malawians have tested positive for hepatitis B and 6.8% for hepatitis C.

The impact of these preventable illnesses on the development of the country and on the future of its young generation is enormous, particularly in the case of HIV, which mainly affects people in their most active years. HIV/AIDS has contributed to a sharp drop in Malawi's life expectancy from 61 years in 1993 to 37 years today.

As in many other low income countries, contaminated blood was a significant contributor to the spread of illnesses such as HIV/AIDS and hepatitis in Malawi. To help face the growing challenges of these diseases, Malawi launched its national blood transfusion service (MBTS) in 2003. Until then, Malawi had a hospital-based system for blood collection where stocks of blood were insufficient and where safety could not always be guaranteed.

The MBTS initiative, which received EURO 7.8 million from the European Commission and financial commitment from the Malawian government, has built its success on tight administrative management and voluntary, unpaid blood donation.

The MBTS has now established blood centres in Blantyre and Lilongwe (the capital) with a total of 98 fully-trained staff. It supplies all four central hospitals and 80% of district hospitals.

Progress is already measurable in real, human terms. For instance, in 2002 the blood bank at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Blantyre received 7 000 units of blood (half the needed quantity). Screened for HIV, 2 000 units tested positive and the remaining blood could not be used on most of the patients with life-threatening conditions because of incompatible blood types.

Since 2004, when safe blood became available, the paediatric mortality rate at the same hospital has dropped by 60% for children with severe anaemia due to malaria and the maternal mortality rate due to pregnancy complications has fallen by more than 50%.

Today, an average of 30 000 units are collected yearly. Even though the real need is 50 000 – 60 000 units, the improvement is dramatic in a country that did not even have a blood transfusion service less than two years ago. Donations from voluntary, non-remunerated donors are increasing rapidly.
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More on World Blood Donor Day, the campaign “Celebrating your gift of blood” and activities in different parts of the world can be found on the web site www.wbdd.org or http://www.who.int/bloodsafety/events/en

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