World Blood Donor Day 2018

Message from Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh,
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Giving blood is a uniquely powerful act. As the theme of this year’s World Blood Donor Day – ‘Be there for someone else. Give blood. Share life’ – emphasizes, giving blood is a simple way to save a life, at the same time as demonstrating the solidarity, altruism, empathy and kindness that most of us strive to practice each and every day.

For many years WHO and its partners have highlighted the special place human blood holds within modern medicine and the health systems that practice it: Unlike other pharmaceutical products, blood has no substitute. From plasma to platelet, white cell to red, blood cannot be replicated or synthesized. The availability of blood and blood products is wholly dependent on the kindness of voluntary, non-remunerated donors – persons with no family affiliation and who give their time and blood out of a sense of civic responsibility, without monetary payment.

Today, on World Blood Donor Day, WHO South-East Asia celebrates and salutes all persons in the Region who donate on this basis. For a woman suffering birth complications, a child with severe anemia, a person requiring urgent surgery, or a population caught in a public health crisis, regular donors can be the difference between life and death; sickness and health.

Nevertheless, the solidarity and altruism blood donors demonstrate is – in the final analysis – only as powerful as the blood and blood product systems that collect, process, disseminate, store and transfuse their blood.

To this end, Member countries across the South-East Asia Region have made significant progress in scaling up implementation of the WHO global strategy for safe blood. All Member countries have now developed and are implementing national policies on blood transfusion and blood safety. Region-wide, all blood donated is tested for the potential of transfusion-transmitted infections. Remarkably, 82% of the blood collected in the Region is from voluntary, non-remunerated donors – a strong indication of the potential for further gains.

As always, however, there is room for improvement. Three areas stand out.

First, all Member countries can significantly enhance the efficiency with which they process and distribute blood products by carrying out detailed planning and needs assessments. Where they aren’t already, centralized blood banks responsible for the collection, processing and distribution of blood should be designated as a matter of priority, while the volume of blood needed to cover specific
catchment areas should be accurately evaluated. As part of this, blood storage centers – including primary health care facilities – should be allocated and reliable supply systems established. Doing so will ensure blood products are readily available to communities in remote and hard-to-reach areas.

Second, stronger haemovigilance – from donation to processing, and from storage to transfusion – will ensure Member countries have seamless blood product systems in place. Specifically, Member countries should ensure haemovigilance measures are reported to the WHO Global Database on Blood Donor Safety, with a particular focus on ensuring all private and public facilities do the same. Similarly, they should also work to harness laboratory technology to guarantee the highest quality screening possible is carried out.

And finally, despite the need for more blood (at present around 15.9 million units of blood are collected Region-wide annually, with an estimated 18 million units required), Member countries should make concerted efforts to limit the need for blood products in the first place. The best way to do that is by providing high-quality essential services at the primary level, including attentive antenatal care, sharp-eyed disease screening and diagnosis, and effective health promotion and counselling as a matter of routine.

Though giving blood may be a simple way to save a life, strengthening the systems that collect, process, disseminate, store and transfuse blood is also a potent means of fortifying health systems more generally. That, in turn, will advance progress towards a goal for which WHO South-East Asia and its Member countries are all striving for: access to essential health services for all.

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