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Updated 08.43 AM

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Serious shortage of safe blood for transfusions

BEIJING - The world is facing a severe shortage of blood for transfusions, requiring a global rethink on how to encourage people to become donors, according to experts at an international conference ending on Wednesday.

In 2000 to 2001, the 178 countries which reported blood donations reported a total annual collection of 81 million units of donated blood, with each unit being about 350ml.



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The WHO says the world is facing a severe shortage of blood for transfusions.

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But that's insufficient to meet the demand, especially in developing countries, said Ms Neelam Dhingra, the World Health Organization's coordinator in charge of blood transfusion safety.

Shortage serious in developing countries

Sixty per cent of the blood donated worldwide came from the developed world and only 40 per cent came from developing countries, even though 80 per cent of the world's population lives in developing countries.

'The main challenges are the blood programs in many developing countries are fragmented. There's a lack of blood,' Ms Dhingra said.

Developing countries also face cultural barriers to blood donations, said Mr Peter Carolan, senior officer for the International Red Cross' blood, health and care department.

'In Africa, men feel by giving blood they will become impotent. There are other cases, including Asia, where people feel because it's my blood, handed down from generation to generation, I should keep it in my family,' he said.

It was important for those countries to start educating young people at an early age about the importance of donating blood, he said, urging governments to bring blood collection vans to schools.

Besides the shortage, Ms Dhingra said that in developing countries, 'blood that's available is not safe blood and not all blood is tested'.

She estimated that six million of the 81 million units of blood donated globally during the 2000 to 2001 period is not tested.

Most of the blood donated in developing countries is collected from family members who have little choice but to give blood when their relatives need transfusions, or from paid donors, and not from the 'safest donors', she added.

Encouraging regular donors

But even developed countries face challenges getting people to donate on a regular basis.

Mr Carolan said the problem for developed countries is not recruitment, but retention of blood donors.

He suggested make blood donations as painless and convenient as possible and to make donors feel appreciated, so they can be motivated to keep donating throughout their life.

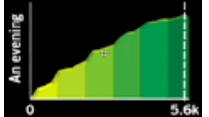
In many countries, potential donors just don't have the time to spare, Mr Carolan said, adding that countries should consider bringing blood collection to offices and driver's testing sites.

The five-day conference sponsored by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the WHO, aimed at tackling a shrinking donor base and sustaining donations. -- AFP

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