

The countdown to World Blood Donor Day (WBDD) has started. As last year, the day will be celebrated on 14 June, the birth date of Karl Landsteiner, who discovered the ABO blood group system.

This week the World Health Assembly, which includes the 192 Member States of the World Health Organization, agreed WBDD will be celebrated internationally on 14 June each year to promote voluntary blood donation globally.

This year, World Blood Donor Day 2005 will have the theme “Celebrating your gift of blood” and will highlight true stories of people whose lives have been changed — in many cases saved — by blood.

Again, the day will be celebrated across the globe with one city representing the fulcrum of activities. This year that city is London, United Kingdom, a major international hub and capital of a country which has a solid tradition of collection of safe blood supplies by relying on voluntary, unpaid donation.

WBDD provides the opportunity to raise awareness of the need for blood and blood donors. Over 80 million units of blood are donated every year around the world, but only 39% is collected in developing countries where 82% of the global population live.

The day will also highlight the fact that voluntary unpaid blood donors are the foundation of a safe blood supply because they are associated with significantly lower levels of infections that can be transmitted by transfusion, including HIV and hepatitis viruses. Screening for transfusion-transmissible infections is essential, but the safest donations come from the safest donors.

A reliable supply of safe blood is essential for scaling up health at several levels, particularly for women and children. For instance, more than half a million women die every year from complications related to pregnancy and childbirth worldwide - 99% of them in developing countries. Haemorrhage, accounting for 25% of the complications, is the most common cause of maternal death. Up to 70% of all blood transfusions in Africa are given to children with severe

anaemia due to malaria, which accounts for about one in five of all childhood deaths in Africa.

WBDD is also an important part of the strategy to reduce transmission of serious illnesses like HIV/AIDS, malaria, hepatitis B and C. The latest figures collected by WHO, based on a global survey, show that at least 65 countries did not test all donated blood for HIV, hepatitis B, hepatitis C and syphilis, as recommended by WHO.

Note to editors

The World Blood Donor Day logo is available on request. It would be very useful if you could print it with any article to further increase awareness of this important day.

World Blood Donor Day was held for the first time on 14 June 2004, with an international launch in Johannesburg hosted by the South African National Blood Service. It was celebrated in nearly 80 countries around the world.

While it is hoped that WBDD will create wider awareness of the importance of voluntary blood donation and encourage more people to become regular blood donors, the purpose is not to attract a big influx of new donors on 14 June. Rather, it is designed to celebrate and thank those individuals who voluntarily donate their blood without any reward, except the knowledge that they have helped to save lives, particularly those who give blood on a regular basis two or three times each year. It is our hope that a new generation of blood donors will follow their example, providing the safest blood possible for use wherever and whenever it is needed to save life.

14 June has been selected as World Blood Donor Day by three major organizations working for voluntary non-remunerated blood donation: the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the International Federation of Blood Donor Organizations and the International Society of Blood Transfusion. These organizations have been joined by the World Health Organization, which is co-sponsoring the event. Between them, they represent 192 Member States, 181 national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 50 national voluntary blood donor organizations and blood transfusion specialists throughout the world

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