

## Voluntary Blood Donation among the Youth: Time to Consider Service-improving Strategies?

Voluntary blood donation is a key strategy in improving availability of, and access to, a life-saving product for populations requiring blood transfusion for a variety of medical conditions.<sup>1</sup> In the Philippines, the value of voluntary blood donation is recognized by the state through Republic Act No. 7719, enacted nearly three decades ago.<sup>2</sup> Among others, this piece of legislation aims to encourage citizens to donate blood through educational and advocacy activities that will “instill public consciousness of the principle that blood donation is a humanitarian act.” But is this appeal to altruism sufficient?

The repeated calls for action by the Department of Health (DOH), through its National Voluntary Blood Services Program, may indicate otherwise. For instance, it was noted that in 2009, about one in four blood units collected were from replacement donation (i.e., blood donation from family and friends in exchange for stored blood used by a patient).<sup>3</sup> The low voluntary blood donation rates were further exacerbated by the pandemic situation amidst a constant demand for blood transfusion, hence the DOH taps its regular donors such as uniformed personnel.<sup>4</sup> Stakeholders particularly appealed to the youth to donate blood to boost supply.<sup>5,6</sup> But how do the youth fare?

In the paper by Mappala et al.<sup>7</sup> in this issue of the *Acta Medica Philippina*, the authors reported that among a sample of relatively young, educated, internet-savvy, and urban-dwelling respondents, only about one in three ever donated blood, and of this number, about two-thirds either donated blood only when needed, or just did the practice once. Most of the respondents have a relatively high knowledge and awareness of blood donation, and were motivated to donate blood for altruistic and pro-social purposes. From this data alone, appealing to humanitarian and civic duty, the very heart of the current national policy and program, appears to be not enough to encourage the practice of blood donation, at least in so far as this population segment is concerned.

Other results from the same survey, however, point to one other area that stakeholders in the voluntary blood donation program can focus on to increase uptake by the population, and this is with respect to the availability and accessibility of the service to the target population. Participants rated highly the statements pertaining to the geographic proximity of the facility, attitude of staff towards blood donors, and availability of communication lines for addressing queries, as motivators for blood donation. From a management perspective, these align with the value chain strategic service delivery model, which can be considered by stakeholders in designing the voluntary blood donation service and facility.<sup>8</sup>

More specifically, blood donation services can look into incorporating value-adding service delivery strategies in their design of their offering, considering the experience of the service user *before*, *during*, and *after* the service has been rendered. These strategies are described in detail elsewhere, and I will just attempt to list down some considerations specific to the blood donation service. *Pre-service* strategies include market analysis (including market segmentation and differentiation, in this case possibly developing different approaches and messages for target donors such as the youth, older adults, etc.), pricing (while voluntary blood donation is free, some facilities are authorized to charge a fee for the processing of the donated blood), location (of the blood donation facilities, and deciding whether these should be fixed post or mobile units), and promotion (among others, how to inform the target donors about the service). *Point-of-service* considerations, meanwhile, pertain to the totality of the donor experience from the time they arrive, and eventually leave, the blood donation facility, and encompasses all aspects of clinical operations, quality assurance, process innovation, and patient satisfaction. Lastly, *after-service* strategies will have to include aspects on how to encourage a person who donated blood once to become a regular donor, as well as an advocate and ambassador for blood donation who can encourage and influence family and friends to likewise donate blood in a voluntary manner (i.e., as part of follow-up and follow-on activities).

I write this Editorial on the eve of the 29<sup>th</sup> year since Republic Act No. 7719 was promulgated. Given the evolving characteristics of the target blood donor pool, this may be the opportune time to shift from focusing purely on promotion of the pro-social value of blood donation, and incorporate service-improving strategies in the blood donation system, to bring us closer to the policy vision of mobilizing “all sectors of the community to participate in mechanisms for voluntary and non-profit collection of blood.”

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