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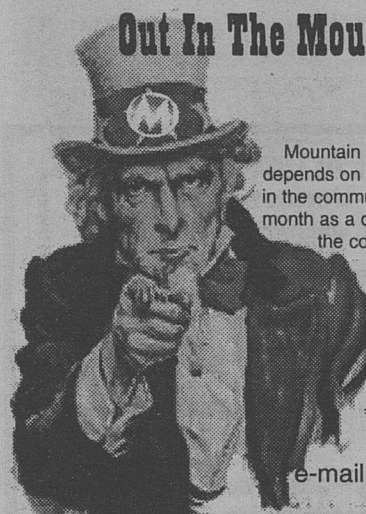
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Coming In Loud and Queer: Red Crusade



**joel
arthur
nichols**

I first learned four years ago that gay men, or men who have had sex with men, are not allowed to give blood. A friend mentioned it off-hand while talking about donation and completely shocked me. I did a little research and learned that if a man has had "sexual contact" with another man after 1970, he was forbidden from ever giving blood.

It struck me as something that people should be riled up about. After all, giving blood helps people and there are often blood shortages. As far as I knew, all blood products were tested between donation and distribution. I was certain that the

Red Cross has routinely ignored other FDA regulations, but kept true to the one barring gay men from donation.

By this time I was pissed. A man could shoot heroin, then have unprotected sex with prostitutes, wait two years and then donate like anyone else. I, on the other hand, am forbidden because of sexual contact with another man.

"Sexual contact" isn't even defined. By some definitions, it could mean holding hands or kissing. Oral and anal sex are covered, too, regardless of safety measures. How could getting a safe blowjob from a virgin possi-

The Red Cross has routinely ignored other FDA regulations, but held true to the one barring gay men from making a donation.

American Red Cross would want as many people as possible to donate, and that there would be few restrictions because of testing.

I understand some restrictions: if you've slept with a prostitute, gotten a tattoo recently, traveled extensively in diseased areas of the world, or had unsafe sex, the American Red Cross needs to be careful. Funnily enough, these restrictions have expiration dates, so you only have to wait a while if you've had straight sex with a prostitute or been to a malarial area.

A little more research told me that the restrictions against MSMs were from the Food and Drug Administration, not the Red Cross. I felt better about the organization and resented them less. Then I learned that

it would be as dangerous as unprotected intercourse with prostitutes? Why is it that men who can prove HIV-negative status are denied?

I started volunteering outside of blood drives, asking people to read and sign a letter to the FDA that called for an end to the boycott. I found out that almost everyone I talked to was also surprised that gay men and MSMs were denied without qualification. There is no way around it: any sexual contact with another man disqualifies.

Any women who have had sex with MSMs are also barred from giving blood forever. So many of my friends are now forbidden from giving blood that it's hard to think of more than two or three who could go to an American Red Cross blood drive and donate.

Some of my friends and acquaintances lie. During the pre-donation questionnaire, they just deny ever having sex with men. They know that their blood is safe and feel a duty to help out. I, on the other hand, feel a duty to try and change the regulation.

Discrimination based on groups rather than risk factors is a shame. I would have no problem barring men who have had unprotected anal or oral sex with other men and forcing them to wait the same amount of time straight people do. I also would welcome a definition of "sexual contact" that clearly defined what the FDA thinks is safe or not. The vagueness of the restriction is a way of piling on more shame to gay sex. The message to me is: it's not just butt fucking that you have to worry about, it's kissing and hand holding and perhaps even "intimate looks."

It reminds me of the strengthening of the German law against homosexuals (Paragraph 175) by the Nazis. Before Hitler, the law forbade sodomy, during the Third Reich, men could be arrested for associating with gay men or casting a passionate glance in the way of another man. This example is not to equate the FDA with Nazis, only to show how shame and criminalization can go hand in hand.

I saw a banner for a blood drive in Rutland yesterday, and I'm sure they're popping up all over the state. I beg you not to deny yourself and lie in order to give blood. Don't hide because you're queer. Be vigilant for your rights. Withhold your blood donation until they really need it, until supplies are so low that the white men in suits beg gays to give it. We can't afford to play by their rules until we have all the same rights. ▼

Joel Nichols is withholding his blood donation in Brandon. You can reach him at janichols@wesleyan.edu.