

COVID-19 : Blood shortage adding to the healthcare burden

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Representative image by **Dr Zarine S Bharucha**, Chairperson of the Federation of Bombay Blood Banks & **Suryaprabha Sadasivan**, Vice-President and Healthcare Policy Practice Lead, Chase India.

We are living in unprecedented times. Never before, in the last century has the world had to deal with a pandemic like [Coronavirus](#) (COVID-19) which has already claimed close to 115,000 lives, afflicting close to 19 lakh people globally and has pushed the entire world on the brink of a social and economic uncertainty. Besides its impact on public health, social welfare and economy, such pandemics cause enormous collateral damage to health systems; adverse health effects due to blood-shortage being a crucial one.

The WHO estimates that blood donation by 1% of the population is generally the minimum to meet a nation's most basic need for blood. In India's case, as per the data of 2016-17, there was a shortage of 1.9 million units (or 15%) vis-à-vis the WHO norm. While blood shortage and inconsistency remain a larger issue for India to deal with, the situation has become particularly worrisome owing to COVID-19 lockdown.

Historic experience with outbreaks of such epidemics suggest that there will be significant impact on blood availability due to reduced blood donation. Across many States such as Maharashtra, Himachal Pradesh, West Bengal among several others, there is a mounting concern around blood shortage. In the past three weeks, blood donations have dramatically reduced due to the implementation of social distancing, cancellation of blood drives and low donor turnout owing to fears surrounding coronavirus.

In the current situation, even in absence of elective surgeries, minimal trauma cases, there is an urgent need for blood services to be prepared to move quickly in response to these changes, to ensure blood sufficiency for post-partum hemorrhage, emergency surgeries, cancer treatment and hereditary disorders like [thalassemia](#) and hemophilia.

In fact, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has also indicated last week about the risk of reduction in blood-donors before, during and after COVID-19 and has proposed that blood-services prepare an action-plan to mitigate potential blood-shortage. The National [Blood Transfusion](#) Council (NBTC) also released recommendations to blood banks and donor organizers to maintain protocols related to COVID-19 to ensure safety of all the people involved in blood [transfusion](#) services and blood adequacy in such times.

However, various challenges have been hampering voluntary blood donation in this period. Firstly, donors are not proactively going to blood banks or hospitals due to the fear of contracting Coronavirus from such places which could be exposed to infected patients. Secondly, lockdown has restricted movement of staff at blood collection centres and of donors which has worsened the situation. Lastly, until now, there was limited awareness among many blood banks and centres on requisite safety and social distancing protocols to conduct blood collection without creating any safety hazards for personnel and donors.

Needless to say, it is necessary to build awareness for personnel across transfusion services to follow the recommendations of WHO and NBTC to ensure that the site of blood-donation is made safe for the staff and the donor, through social-distancing practices and infection control measures.

While the Ministry of Home Affairs has recently issued an advisory to all the States requesting them to permit smooth movement for all essential and non-essential goods, with a special mention of blood-services, there is a need for State governments to safeguard and facilitate the movement of donors and supply chain of critical materials and equipment used in blood and component collection.

To address the issue of public fear around blood donation, the Government must undertake a public sensitization and awareness campaign on the need for voluntary blood donation in such times. This communication must also mitigate anxiety of donors around safety of the donation process by educating them on the COVID-19 related safety protocols being adopted by blood banks and hospitals.

It will be vital to monitor the number of blood donations to pre-empt shortages and plan donor outreach and mobilization as quickly as possible. The timely availability of safe and quality blood is often a decisive factor in saving human life.

The need for blood is continuous in any functional healthcare system. We certainly do not want anyone in need of transfusion to die due to want of blood. Therefore, it is crucial to build public and stakeholder confidence in these uncertain times of Coronavirus and ensure continuity of the blood donation process across India. The blood shortage situation in these uncertain times, will only be as good or bad as the governments and communities allow it to be.

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