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Jehovah's Witnesses drop prohibitions against some transfusions

In a dramatic, but little publicized development, the Jehovah's Witness hierarchy has quietly dropped its prohibition against several common kinds of blood transfusions.

Typically, the change came in a "Question from Readers" column rather than a policy position plainly labelled as such and officially announcing the change. The June 15, 2000 *Watchtower*, a journal issued by the church's official publishing house, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, answers the question, "Do Jehovah's Witnesses accept any medical products derived from blood?"

The answer begins with the claim that their position is "quite simple" and unchangeable:

The fundamental answer is that Jehovah's Witnesses do not accept blood. We firmly believe

that God's law on blood is not open to reform to fit shifting opinions. Still, new issues arise because blood can now be processed into four primary components. In deciding whether to accept such, a Christian should look beyond possible medical benefits and risks. His concern should be what the Bible says and the potential effect on his relationship with Almighty God.

The anonymous author goes on to say that today "most transfusions are not of whole blood but of one of its primary components: (1) red cells, (2) white cells, (3) platelets, [and] (4) plasma (serum), the fluid part. . . . Jehovah's Witnesses hold that accepting whole blood or any of those four primary components violates God's law."

The author continues, however, with the radical statement that Witness theology has no prohibition against accepting "fractions derived from the primary blood components."

"We cannot say. The Bible does not give details, so a Christian must make his own conscientious decision before God," s/he advises.

The Associated Jehovah's Witnesses for Reform on Blood (AJWRB), a group of Witnesses calling for removing all church prohibitions against transfusions, hailed the statement as a major improvement. Previously, they said, the Witness hierarchy has allowed members to "accept only fractions of blood plasma without facing possible expulsion from the church."

Examples of plasma fractions include albumin, immunoglobulins, and clotting factors VIII and IX for hemophiliacs. Witness officials rationalized these as only "minor" components of blood. "Sugar is not a cherry pie," they said.

However, the Watchtower previously prohibited members from accepting fractions of the other

components: red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets. The new policy changes acceptance of these fractions from a disfellowshipping offense to a matter for individual conscience. Jehovah's Witnesses will now be able to accept interferons and interleukins from white cells and fibrinogen (a wound healing agent) from platelets.

"More importantly," the AJWRB points out, "the policy apparently opens the door to the use of hemoglobin based blood substitutes like 'Poly-Heme,' that are close to obtaining FDA approval." Hemoglobin is obtained from fractionating red cells and would therefore be permitted under the new policy.

"Hemoglobin based blood substitutes," says the AJWRB, "have the potential to save many Jehovah's Witness lives that are presently being lost in cases of trauma or surgery with massive blood loss."

Long journey

It has taken the Witnesses many years and, say reformers, thousands of preventable deaths to reach this liberalized policy. The Watchtower first denounced transfusions in the 1940s, but did not make them a disfellowshipping offense until 1961.

The Watchtower cited Bible verses against eating blood, such as Genesis 9:3-6; Leviticus 17:10, 11; and Acts 15:22-29 and 21:25, to justify their position. The sacredness of blood is symbolized, the Watchtower said, by the crucifixion in which Christ shed his blood as a perfect atonement for the sins of mankind. Blood transfusions, therefore, "[trample] on the Son of God,"¹ thundered the Watchtower.

Sociologist Richard Singelenberg calls the prohibition a "purification ritual" to create "structural boundaries" around a persecuted minority.² Scholar Gerald Bergman, who has published widely on the evolution of Witness transfusion doctrine, suggests that the opposition to transfusions grew out of the Witnesses' opposition to vaccines since the same Bible verses were cited to justify both positions.³

In 1952, the Society dropped its opposition to vaccines and said members could make their own decisions about them as long as the vaccines do not come from blood or have blood products in them.

A similar evolution has taken place on the issue of organ transplants. In 1967, the Watchtower Society said that "organ transplants are cannibalism" and therefore unacceptable.⁴ In 1980, it changed the position, calling it a decision for the individual member's conscience.⁵

The prohibition of transfusions has continued for nearly half a century, but the Watchtower Society has had to put out more and more exceptions and caveats as the Jehovah's Witness faith has grown rapidly to six million members worldwide and as medicine has advanced.

According to ex-members and the AJWRB, the Watchtower Society has not announced these exceptions forthrightly, publicly, and promptly. Hemophiliacs, for example, were still forbidden to use any blood products according to a Watchtower statement in 1975. Soon afterward, the Watchtower decided that hemophiliacs could use certain blood products, but did not publish their decision until 1981. During the interim, some hemophiliacs petitioned the Witness hierarchy privately and got permission to accept clotting factors VII and VIII, while others went to their graves believing their faith would not allow them to receive blood fractions.⁶

The biblical basis for the Witnesses' opposition to transfusions has been undercut by science. Their church used to argue that they resulted in the body's "eating" of blood, which was forbidden in the Bible.

In the 1960s, however, church leaders learned that transfused blood is not digested, but is used in the body much like a transplanted organ. Since the Witnesses' Governing Body claimed that the world would end in 1975 and believed that medical science would soon develop blood substitutes, they retained the ban on transfusions along with semantic hair-splitting, but eventually admitted that the body does not use as food the blood given in transfusion.⁷

Other developments have also narrowed the gap between sound medical practice and the Witnesses. The AIDS epidemic has led health care providers to greatly reduce the practice of transfusing. New techniques and non-blood plasma expanders minimize the need for transfusions.⁸

European council requires freedom of choice

Some foreign countries have refused to grant the Jehovah's Witnesses status as a religion because its prohibition of transfusions violates human rights agreements. Witnesses have been arrested, lost their property, and forced to serve in the military because their church was not recognized by the government.

To gain recognition in Bulgaria, the Jehovah's Witnesses petitioned the European Commission of Human Rights for the Council of Europe. In 1997, the Commission suggested that Bulgaria enter into a friendly settlement with the Witnesses, and in 1998, the settlement was announced. It gave state recognition to the religion and in turn the Witness leadership pledged that members in Bulgaria had "free choice" to accept blood transfusions "for themselves and their children, without any control or sanction" from the church.

Reform groups were quick to distribute this information on the internet as a dramatic change in policy. The Watchtower Public Affairs Office in Brooklyn just as quickly released a statement claiming that the Bulgarian agreement contained no change in their doctrine.

Another development that may have backfired on the leadership was the decision to use medical science itself to bolster their opposition to transfusions. Until the 1970s Watchtower charges were wildly unscientific. For example they claimed that "moral insanity" and "sexual perversions" could be acquired from transfusions.⁹

In the past two decades, however, Jehovah's Witness literature has become much more sophisticated. It uses quotes from medical journals to show dangers of transfusions, claim that transfusions are overused, and argue that non-blood plasma expanders are just as effective as blood transfusions.¹⁰

That approach, however, also brought the doctrine under the scrutiny of science, from both within and without the church. The Associated Jehovah's Witnesses for Reform on Blood was formed and became a strong and credible voice calling for change in a "tragic and misguided policy that has claimed thousands of lives, many of them

children." Many AJWRB members are state-licensed health care providers. Many are church elders or serve on the church's Hospital Liaison Committees, which are supposed to explain and defend the church's official transfusion policy to patients and providers. All insist on anonymity to protect their status in the church.

The AJWRB hammered away at the inconsistency of allowing Witnesses to accept fractions of plasma, but not of the other components of blood. The Watchtower argued that protein fractions of plasma pass naturally through the placental barrier from a pregnant woman to her fetus to provide immunity to infections and therefore accepting transfusions of plasma fractions was "natural."¹¹

In response, the AJWRB publicized scientific research indicating that both the mother's red and white blood cells also pass through the placental barrier throughout a pregnancy.¹²

Even after the latest liberalization of the blood policy, the AJWRB has raised scientific challenges. For example, plasma remains banned as a primary component of blood, but fractionations of plasma are allowed. What about fresh frozen plasma which is produced after the secondary fractionation of platelet rich plasma and then frozen?, the AJWRB asks. What about the new SD Plasma, which undergoes secondary fractionation, detergent treatment, hydrophobic chromatography, and filtration? These products are called plasma, but have been produced by secondary fractionation. The SD Plasma consists almost entirely of albumin, fibrinogen, and clotting factors, each of which the Jehovah's Witnesses are allowed to receive individually.¹³

Ironically, the liberalized policy on blood transfusions has arrived at the same time as Witness churches are reportedly more punitive than ever with shunning and breaking up marriages. Witness officials have told the media that they no longer "disfellowship" members for accepting any kind of transfusion. However, they also say that anyone who accepts a forbidden transfusion has "disassociated" himself from the church, and dissidents report that the ostracism and hostility are the same for both the disassociated and the disfellowshipped. They must

be treated as “dead” by all loyal members, including relatives. The only new feature is that now the church shifts responsibility for the hostility to the aberrant member.¹⁴

Comment



CHILD is proud to note that Jerry Bergman predicted the Jehovah's Witnesses would drop their opposition to transfusions when he spoke at a CHILD conference in 1999. He said their main reluctance was having to answer for the thousands of members who have died refusing transfusions and believing it necessary for their salvation.

So the church has changed its policy once again, but in such a bland, low-key manner that many members may not even realize it. The church claims its policy is based on the eternal laws of God and does not include a change, but in fact it is a very significant change that could save many lives.

The fact that “blood can now be processed into four primary components” is an inadequate rationale for the policy shift because such processing has been done for decades. It is absurd for the church to claim that members may make decisions according to personal conscience on fractions of blood components because the Bible is silent on the issue. The Bible is also silent on transfusions of blood's four primary components and of whole blood.

All that the Bible says on this issue is “eat no blood,” and the Watchtower quietly gave up its claim several decades ago that the body digests transfused blood.

“A little learning is a dangerous thing;/ Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring,” said the poet Alexander Pope. The Witness leadership used to strongly discourage college education and steer members into mission work instead. But religions

always need a few educated people and in the 1990s that ban was dropped also. Today there are Witness lawyers, teachers, nurses, and even medical doctors. The anonymous members of the AJWRB appear to be well educated in health care. They deserve great credit for their tenacious scientific challenges to the Witness hierarchy, which we believe have been a catalyst for the Witnesses' latest policy change.

The mainstream media should report this story so that the six million members of the Jehovah's Witness faith have a better chance to know about these new options that could save their lives.

¹ Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Penn., *How Can Blood Save Your Life?*, Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (1990): 24-25.

² Richard Singelenberg, “The blood transfusion taboo of Jehovah's Witnesses: origin, development and function of a controversial doctrine.” *Social Sciences and Medicine* 31(1990):520.

³ Gerald Bergman, *Jehovah's Witnesses and Blood Transfusions*, St. Louis: Personal Freedom Outreach (1980):17.

⁴ *Watch Tower Today* 15 Nov. 1967:702-4. See also *Awake!* 8 June 1968:21.

⁵ *Watch Tower Today* 15 March 1980:31.

⁶ Randy Watters, *Bethel Ministries Newsletter* Sep./Oct. 1992:1.

⁷ AJWRB, “Do Jehovah's Witnesses Really Abstain from Blood?,” undated pamphlet.

⁸ Albert Cornelius, Letter to Rita Swan 30 Dec. 1994:2.

⁹ Singelenberg, *supra*, 518.

¹⁰ See for example WBTS, *supra*.

¹¹ C. Roy-Bornstein *et al.*, “Treatment of a Jehovah's Witness with immune globulin: case of a child with Kawasaki syndrome,” *Pediatrics* 94 (1994): 112-13.

¹² AJWRB, “Modern science refutes WTS blood fraction policy,” posted on web site <http://www.ajwrb.org>.

¹³ AJWRB, “Watchtower Blood Policy Changes Again,” posted on website *supra*.

¹⁴ AJWRB, “Watchtower Society ceases disfellowshipping action,” posted on website *supra*.