



Giesinger does admit that the inquiry, and the events surrounding it, have made her job more difficult. However, she added that everyone has learned to live with it. "It's been around so long that it's kind of like a thorn in your foot — after a while, you forget it's there."

"Plasma donors," she added, "are a special kind of people."

The need for larger collections is being driven by rapidly increasing demand for plasma and plasma products. By collecting plasma directly instead of extracting it from whole blood, donors at the Thunder Bay centre are able to give twice as much and are able to donate more times each year.

The procedure, called plasmapheresis, takes about 45 minutes. Donors are connected to 1 of 20 machines at the centre — each is worth \$50 000 — that automatically draws and centrifuges the blood and returns red blood cells to the donor. "Come take your red blood cells for a spin — that's one of our slogans," jokes Scott Ferris, a donor recruiter.

He said the Thunder Bay centre is on target in terms of donor numbers and plasma production. Still, because controversy surrounding tainted blood continues to swirl, the job of filling the clinic's 20 beds is not easy. However, Ferris thinks the atmosphere has been improving. "People are coming back. From what I can tell there has been a 180-degree shift in terms of the public focus. People do not seem so concerned about the safety issue anymore — they are more concerned about whether the blood supply will be there for them."

According to a recent *CMAJ* supplement (Expert Working Group. Guidelines for red blood cell and plasma transfusion for adults and children. *Can Med Assoc J* 1997;156:S1[11]) the odds of becoming infected with

HIV following a blood donation are now 1 in 1 million. Chances of contracting other viral infections such as hepatitis B range from 1 in 60 000 to 1 in 1 million.

"It's safe, extremely safe," said Ferris, who thinks physicians must inform patients that they have a "much better chance" of being involved in an automobile accident than of receiving an infectious blood product. "Last night there were probably 5 fender-benders in Thunder Bay alone . . . [but] there was not a single problem with the blood supply in Canada."

In Thunder Bay, plasma donations are made by appointment. First-time donors face an initial 2.5 hour processing session during which a medical history is taken and a complete

checkup is done. On subsequent visits there is a briefer screening to check for any changes in the donor's lifestyle or health.

Ferris said the World Health Organization recognizes that creation of a voluntary-donor base is the safest way to collect blood. An alternative method — paying for donations — is common in the US. "I saw the [American] system at work recently and I was disgusted — I couldn't believe some of the things I saw. Canadians understand that we must not go this route."

Unfortunately, Canada has long held the distinction of being one of the few developed countries that must purchase blood products abroad. The Red Cross currently collects about 200 000 litres of plasma annually, but 400 000 are needed and demand is growing.

The shortfall is covered by products purchased in the US, but the costs of dependence on a foreign source are measured in more than dollar terms. "During the Gulf War there was a definite shortage of blood products in Canada, partly because the Americans who supply our needs were also experiencing a shortage," Chesterman recalled. "In times of shortages they cut back [on exports], and we suffer."

To address this issue, the Red Cross has plans to develop 5 to 7 new permanent collection centres, with Thunder Bay's site being the first. The Canadian plants are modelled on the Bayer Corporation's collection facilities in the US. American experience indicates that areas with populations of about 100 000 people and no other permanent blood-donor clinics are the best locations for plasma plants.

It appears that Thunder Bay fits this bill well. ?



A Thunder Bay donor: collecting plasma is a 45-minute procedure

Blood fractionation produces slew of products

The fractionation process turns blood into many different products, including albumin, factor VIII, immune globulin and immune human serum globulin. The plasma products that are currently purchased outside Canada include factor IX, globulin used to treat specific infections and antithrombin III.