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-D.W. Pine, *TIME Magazine Creative Director*

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COLUMNS, OPINION

## ***Student Submission: Save A Life!***

On February 22, 2018 • By Giselle Moses



Giving blood saves lives. Did you know that you can save multiple lives with just one donation? Scientists can’t make new blood in a lab, but our bodies are constantly making new blood cells, so most healthy adults can safely donate as often as every other month. Donating blood is a free, but priceless gift for those in need, including car accident victims, cancer patients, and patients having surgery.

A special group of individuals who need our donations are those with blood disorders like sickle cell disease or thalassemia. People are born with these conditions, with their bodies making abnormal red blood cells that can cause a variety of complications, some of which are life threatening.

In emergency situations, these individuals may need transfusions to add healthy (donated) blood to their systems. Others must have regular transfusions every few weeks throughout their whole lives. Blood donations from healthy people are crucial to meeting these transfusion needs.

While correctly prescribed blood transfusions can be life saving, they can also have their own complications. Harmful reactions to blood can be avoided by using donor blood that closely matches the recipient’s each time someone’s blood is transfused. This matching is possible when the pool of blood donors are genetically similar to those receiving blood.

Before the large global migrations of the past few centuries, sickle cell disease and thalassemia evolved in “malaria belts” of the eastern hemisphere: sub-Saharan Africa, the Mediterranean, Middle East, Indian subcontinent, and Southeast Asia. This is because having mild forms of the disease or not having the disease but having the “trait” (carrying just one instead of two copies of the gene for the disease) actually provides protection against malaria.

A person’s genes determine more about their blood than just whether they have one of these disorders or not. Each of us has a particular blood “type” determined by the genes we inherit from our parents. The symbols “A,” “B,” “O,” “+,” and “-” refer to whether our blood cells have certain particular proteins, called antigens, attached to them. These common antigens are the only ones that most of us need to be concerned about.

People who may have transfusions more than once in their lives need to be aware of many other antigens. If they receive blood with antigens that aren’t present in their own blood, their immune system may see these “foreign” proteins as dangerous and develop antibodies against them. If that person receives the same antigen again in a later transfusion, their antibodies will mount an attack against the “invaders” in a reaction that can be fatal for the patient.

And this is where donors come in. If a donor’s blood lacks the same antigens the patient’s does, the patient can avoid having such a reaction – and may not even need to develop antibodies in the first place.

Georgia has one of the nation’s largest sickle cell populations – over 7,000 individuals at last count. Our thalassemia population is small, but it is expected to grow because of continuing migration into Georgia from other states and countries. To provide necessary and safe blood for transfusion to these individuals requires blood donations from people with ancestors from the areas described above.

In Georgia, this especially means increasing donations from African Americans. Nationwide, less than 1 percent of all donated blood comes from African Americans. This is an alarming call to action for our state.

If you are at least 16 years old, weigh more than 110 pounds, and are in generally good health, you are eligible to give blood. Most people with diabetes or high blood pressure can donate as long as those conditions are under control. If you have a cold or other infection, you should wait until you are well.

Donating blood is easy. The process takes about an hour from start to finish. You can expect to register, provide a confidential health history, and have a mini health exam with a health professional. This includes a finger prick to get a drop of your blood for testing. If these screening procedures confirm that you are a candidate, the actual donation will typically take 10 to 12 minutes.

Some people are “deferred” for their own safety because their blood tests may show a low iron count. This does not mean they can’t donate later. If a donor was deferred in the past because of low iron, they can eat nutritious foods and drink plenty of fluids before volunteering to give the next time.

Donating blood is safe. You cannot get HIV/AIDs, hepatitis, or other diseases from giving blood. A new, sterile needle is used for each donor and then discarded. Different groups at Georgia State organize blood drives on campus in partnership with the two main blood collection agencies in our area: American Red Cross and LifeSouth. Watch for these opportunities and show up to give!

On March 15, the Georgia Health Policy Center in the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies will host blood drive with LifeSouth in honor of individuals with sickle cell disease and thalassemia. We invite all students, faculty, and staff to donate, and especially encourage African Americans and other people of color to give blood.

You might even become a sickle cell hero.

When you donate through LifeSouth, your blood will be tested to see if you are a special match for someone with sickle cell disease. If so, you can become their personal hero by giving blood that goes directly to them when they need it.

When you give blood at 55 Park Place on March 15, you will also receive a free snack and T-shirt. Do you have the urge to help others now? If so, come join us – and encourage your family and friends to donate blood to save a life today!

For more about the Georgia Health Policy Center’s work to improve the lives of people with sickle cell disease and thalassemia, please visit our website:

<http://ghpc.gsu.edu/project/hemoglobin-disorders- data-coordinating- center/>

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1 COMMENT



**Josephine Bila (@JosephineBila)**

FEBRUARY 22, 2018 AT 7:41 PM

Thank you for writing this article! I was born with thalassemia major, so I appreciate your interest in raising awareness on the topic of blood donations. We need more people like you! I'm going to share your article within the communities. 😊