20 December 2021

**IBTS to introduce further changes to its donor eligibility policies**

The IBTS will introduce further changes to a range of deferral policies including those relating to men who have sex with men (MSM) following a report to the IBTS Board by an independent advisory group established by the IBTS to review such deferrals, while maintaining the safety of the blood supply.

The group was chaired by Professor Mary Horgan and membership included IBTS Donor Consultants, Infectious Disease Physicians, Public Health Physicians, an Epidemiologist, and the IBTS Risk & Resilience Manager. Stakeholders were represented by participants from the Irish Haemophilia Society, Sickle and Thalassemia Ireland and HIV Ireland.

The changes agreed by the Board will be introduced in two phases with the initial phase being introduced by the end of March 2022 and the second phase being introduced later in 2022.

The initial phase will reduce the existing 12 month deferral for MSM to 4 months. This is an interim measure while the IBTS introduces new technology, to replace the existing paper health and lifestyle questionnaire (HLQ) with an electronic questionnaire known as the Self-Assessment Health History (SAHH). This will enable phase two, the introduction of an individual assessment process for donors, thus making blood donation more inclusive. The individual assessment of donors’ sexual behaviour will be similar to the FAIR (For the Assessment of Individualised Risk) system introduced by the UK Blood Services.

The deferral of any person who is taking pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) will also be reduced from 12 months to 4 months and this deferral will remain in place after the introduction of the individual assessment.

“The independent advisory committee commenced its work in early 2021.The remit of this advisory committee was to review the current evidence base for donor eligibility in Ireland relating to factors that may increase the risk of a donor acquiring specific blood borne infections (HIV, HBV, HCV and other sexually transmitted infections ). As always maintenance of the safety of the Irish blood supply for all recipients is our primary concern.

The present deferral period for MSM was implemented in January 2017 and in the light of evolving international practice a further review was required,” said IBTS Medical & Scientific Director Professor Stephen Field.

“The IBTS is keen to implement the changes to our donor selection policies, starting first with implementing the reduced deferral periods. This would facilitate enhanced donor access while we plan and make extensive changes to our blood establishment computer system. It will take some time to configure the SAHH, and implement the new system with donors,” said Professor Field.

**ENDS**