



WATCH TOWER

BIBLE AND TRACT SOCIETY OF BRITAIN

THE RIDGEWAY LONDON NW7 1RN

TELEPHONE 020 8906 2211

January 3, 2006

TO ALL CONGREGATIONS

Re: Hospital Liaison Committees

Dear Brothers:

Jehovah has richly blessed the efforts of his people to help the medical and legal communities understand our religious position with regard to blood transfusions. As a result, it is now much easier to receive respectful, competent medical treatment. This has greatly relieved the anxieties that often accompany our endeavours to maintain Christian integrity and ‘abstain from blood.’ (Acts 15:28, 29) The work of the elders serving on the Hospital Liaison Committees (HLCs) has played a vital role in this effort. These brothers have made presentations regarding our stand to tens of thousands of doctors, leaving them numerous items of printed information on non-blood alternatives, including video-cassettes and the DVD entitled *Transfusion Alternatives—Documentary Series*.

Hospital Information Services (HIS) and HLC representatives have attended large medical conferences in many parts of the world where doctors appreciatively have accepted material that is helpful in treating patients without the use of blood transfusions. Now, hospitals and doctors regularly contact HIS and the HLCs, seeking assistance in obtaining medical articles that will help them develop appropriate treatment options for Jehovah’s Witnesses.

There are over 200 elders serving on the 35 HLCs under the direction of the Britain branch office. Worldwide, there are over 9,000 elders serving on more than 1,535 committees. This arrangement, developed by the Governing Body 18 years ago, continues to be a valuable resource for Jehovah’s Witnesses. How can you benefit from this arrangement?

Annually, all elders receive an updated list of the members on your local HLC, along with appropriate instructions. The elders in your congregation keep this material readily available and are pleased to put you in touch with the HLC when you require their help. Members of your HLC have developed a close working relationship with doctors and surgeons in your area, who are experienced in using blood conservation strategies and alternatives to blood transfusion. It is wise to seek HLC assistance, especially in the following situations.

Pregnant sisters: Complications can arise throughout pregnancy. We therefore strongly recommend that any sister who is pregnant contact the local HLC in order to request the document *Care Plan for Women in Labour*.

Children: When a life-threatening emergency occurs, the legal reality is that clinicians can treat minors with what they consider standard practice—which may include blood—without parental consent. Therefore, the degree of co-operation and the experience of the treating doctor are crucial. Parents need to consider their best option, which, with the help of the HLC ahead of time, may mean locating an experienced clinician. It is also worthy of note that some of these doctors will show much respect for teenagers who are able to explain and defend their beliefs in this connection.

Major surgery or trauma: Situations where blood transfusions are commonly administered can present serious challenges for a Christian. By contacting the HLC, ahead of time

if possible, you can be put in contact with an increasing number of doctors who are able to provide non-blood treatment options.

Wisely carry your *Advance Decision to Refuse Specified Medical Treatment* document on your person at all times and ensure that a copy has been lodged with your GP. At the initial referral for surgery, ask your GP to ensure that both the surgeon and the anaesthetist are aware of your status as one of Jehovah's Witnesses. It will be helpful at this stage if you could also have your GP inform them of your views on the matters of blood fractions and procedures involving your own blood. Any necessary surgery involves a team, all members of which need to understand your specific health-care instructions.

It is the course of wisdom to advise the elders in your congregation well ahead of time that you will be admitted to hospital. We appreciate that for some brothers and sisters health-care matters are private and personal, and you may wish to keep specific details confidential. Nevertheless, informing a local elder will ensure that spiritual support and assistance are available. Suddenly having to make an emergency telephone call for help can be extremely stressful, and in those circumstances there might be limits to the degree of assistance the HLC can offer at such short notice.

You may find it helpful to have a family member or close friend accompany you when you are admitted to hospital, so as to provide emotional and moral support. You will be asked to sign a Consent Form. Some hospitals have adapted forms for patients who wish to decline blood transfusion but if such is not available, you will be asked to sign a 'standard' consent document and you will need to ensure that you include a statement clearly refusing blood. Copying out paragraph 2 from your *Advance Decision* document would suffice for this purpose. Before signing, be sure that all such documents are in harmony with your personal health-care directives. You have the right to modify a consent form as necessary, initialling each adjustment you make.

Reviewing these helpful suggestions should serve to lessen your anxiety should a serious medical situation arise, perhaps unexpectedly. It also demonstrates your sincere desire to please Jehovah in all matters. In this connection, please note the answers to the following frequently asked questions.

1. In what circumstances should I contact the hlc and how do I do this? If you, or your doctor, believes that your treatment may involve the blood issue, especially if this is major or complicated surgery, or involves a blood cancer, you should ask one of the elders to contact the HLC.

All elders have been requested to keep the list of HLC contact details available at all times and will be happy to make such contact without delay. This listing and accompanying instructions enable your elders to provide assistance in harmony with your needs.

Even if HLC brothers are known to you, or you have contacted them before, please understand that on each occasion the introductory telephone call to the HLC should be made by a local elder. Not observing this protocol may delay HLC involvement.

2. May the HLC speak directly with a member of my treating team? Depending upon the circumstances, this might be needed. The HLC can be a valuable resource to both the patient and the doctor. HLC brothers will often be at the hospital when an emergency develops, and *with your permission* they may discuss your case with the doctor. In some serious cases, the HLC has been helpful in offering appropriate suggestions when surgery is being planned. Often there is a close working relationship between doctors and members of the HLC. They are also in a position to arrange a consultation with other co-operative doctors who are willing to share their experience. However, HLC members cannot make health-care decisions for you.

3. Why is it important to speak to your anaesthetist about surgical treatment options? Although you may know and have met with the surgeon, anaesthetists may rotate, and it becomes difficult to determine which one will be assisting during the operation. Surgery is a team effort, and all members of the team need to understand your position on blood, on any pharmaceuticals that are made from or include minor blood fractions, and on medical procedures involving the use of your own blood.

It is unfair to the medical team if you fail to communicate your wishes well in advance of the surgery as special arrangements may be necessary where blood loss might be an issue. (*km* 3/91 p. 4 pars. 15-16) Therefore, on the initial consultation you should make a point of requesting that the anaesthetic department be informed that a patient who is one of Jehovah's Witnesses has been scheduled for surgery. This will give them an opportunity to determine your specific wishes and requirements. It can be a challenge to contact and alert the anaesthetic team, but in our experience, this must be patient-driven.

4. What assistance is available for managing pregnancy?—Please see the Announcement concerning the *Care Plan* on page 7 of *Our Kingdom Ministry*, December 2005.

5. Can any doctor or hospital give complete assurance that blood or blood fractions will not be used in treatment of a minor (a patient under the age of 18)? The legal reality is that the law gives authority to a clinician to provide whatever medical treatment is necessary, in his or her clinical judgement, to preserve the life and health of a child. However, there are a growing number of hospitals and doctors known to the HLCs that will endeavour to care for minors without resorting to blood. Treating the paediatric population without blood presents many challenges for the medical profession, but this field has seen significant progress in alternatives to blood transfusion in recent years. While Witness parents do not consent to blood transfusions for their children, they do seek the best medical attention available, seeking the co-operation of the treating team.—*km* 9/92 p. 3 pars. 5-6.

6. What is the relationship between the Hospital Liaison Committees, Patient Support Groups (PSGs), and Hospital Information Services (HIS)? HIS co-ordinates the activities of the HLCs, while HLCs, in turn, co-ordinate the activities of the PSGs. Appropriate materials are supplied to HLCs for their use when meeting with doctors. HLCs have 24-hour access to consult with HIS when assistance is needed in caring for a particular case. From time to time, seminars are held, providing training in various aspects of their work. Careful selection of elders for this special assignment provides a ready source of help in a time of need.

7. In what circumstances can the PSG be called upon for support? If you are referred to a hospital a long way from your congregation you should speak to one of the elders who, either through the local HLC or HIS at the branch office, can arrange for you to receive visits from brothers and sisters who live near the hospital. Brothers serving as members of PSGs are happy to provide the loving care that your own elders would offer, if they were nearer. This could include assistance to family members who travel some distance to visit you. If you have been unable to make such arrangements in advance, you can ask the hospital (often their Chaplaincy Department) to request such a visit via the contact details that they hold. Please note that confidentiality and Data Protection restrictions make it difficult for the local brothers to learn of your needs, unless you make a formal and specific request to receive visits from the PSG.

8. May the HLC be called on behalf of non-Witness relatives? The Governing Body has arranged for HLCs to serve the interests of Jehovah's Witnesses and their minor children in all congregations worldwide. This includes those approved to be unbaptized publishers. It is not possible to extend their activities beyond this. Also, care needs to be exercised on our part that we are not perceived as imposing our religious views upon others.

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9. If an emergency develops while I am travelling, how can I contact the HLC? Each elder has contact information for the HLC locally, and the HLC, in turn, has contact information for the entire country. Hence, for PSG or HLC support within Britain, a call to one of your local elders will initiate assistance being provided. If abroad, when attending a local congregation it is helpful if you can make a note of the telephone numbers of any local, English-speaking elders who, in the event of an emergency, can contact the local HLC in the usual way. Or, a telephone call back to an elder in your home congregation can alert the local HLC to the situation and they, in turn can contact the branch office here for our assistance. Please bear in mind that the *Advance Decision* document may not be legally enforceable in other countries. Nevertheless, it does state your wishes for non-blood medical treatment and should accompany you.

Jehovah continues to show his loving concern for our welfare through his organization, and we continue to seek his blessing as we uphold his perfect law regarding blood. (Ps. 19:7) We send an expression of Christian love and greetings.

Your brothers,

Watch Tower B. & J. Society
OF BRITAIN

PS to the body of elders:

This letter should be read to the congregation by one of the elders in a clear, meaningful manner during the Service Meeting part scheduled for the week beginning January 30, 2006. At point 4, the brother caring for this part should read the relevant Announcement from page 7 of *Our Kingdom Ministry*, December 2005.

All elders should be provided with a copy of this letter. It replaces the July 1, 1992, letters to the congregation and to the body of elders, which should be removed from the congregation's permanent file of policy letters and destroyed. After the aforementioned Service Meeting part, this letter should be retained in the congregation file.

As mentioned in the letter, each year the body of elders receives an updated HLC contact list, along with an accompanying letter which provides additional reminders regarding the blood issue. As these items are received, the material from the previous year should be discarded and the new material retained in the congregation file.

Please could we remind all elders of the importance of ensuring that initial contact with the HLC *always* is made by an elder. We receive numerous reports that often telephone numbers are simply given to publishers for them to call. For information and details that are required *before* making this initial call, please see the questions featured on your HLC contact sheet.

You will also appreciate that the HLC should only be contacted concerning matters specific to the blood issue. All other health-care matters are the responsibility of the individual brother or sister.

Thank you very much for your diligence in following these instructions and in assisting our brothers as they endeavour to abstain from blood.