Blood Bankers Pressured to Unite

For the past year and a half the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare has been trying to figure out how to push the nation's blood-banking systems into a coherent pattern. So last month, HEW called together a variety of medical and consumer groups for a daylong brainstorming session to hammer out their differences and come up with the beginnings of a plan. They could do it any way they wanted, said HEW's Assistant Secretary for Health Charles Edwards, but it had to provide for regionalization of blood services, coordination between the major blood-banking organizations, development of cost-accounting procedures to make the cost of blood services consistent and reasonable throughout the country, and gradual movement toward an all-volunteer system of blood donation.

Edwards made it abundantly clear that, if the private sector can't come up with a decent plan of its own by the end of January, the federal government will have to step in and make things happen, either through new legislation or new federal regulations.

To show how serious the government is, HEW Secretary Caspar Weinberger addressed the meeting, Food and Drug Administration head Alexander Schmidt was there, and Edwards and Harry Meyer, head of FDA's Bureau of Biologics, sat through the whole thing.

By the end of the day, Edwards said that "frankly" he was "not particularly optimistic about bringing these groups together."

The problems are the same that have kept the blood business divided over the past 25 years (see *Science*, 24 and 31 March 1972): the country's two major blood networks, the Red Cross and the American Association of Blood Banks (AABB) simply don't see eye to eye. The Red Cross, concerned with the collection and processing of blood and its distribution to hospitals, believes that blood is a community resource and a community responsibility, that no cost should be attached to the substance itself, and that individuals should not be penalized for not replacing the blood they use. The AABB, most of whose members are hospital blood banks, believes that individual incentives are needed if adequate supplies are to be maintained. It therefore operates on a complicated system of blood credits and "nonreplacement fees," ranging from $15 on up per unit (on top of processing and transfusion costs), which are paid by patients who can't replace blood with blood.

One step has been made toward establishing a common organizational framework. The Red Cross and the Council on Community Blood Centers, the third major noncommercial organization, have agreed to set up an "American Blood Institute" that would serve as a forum for all interested groups to work with the government in reshaping the system. But the AABB doesn't agree with the goals of the proposed institute, which include elimination of the nonreplacement fee. It wants instead a "voluntary commission" on blood banks and transfusion services.

Edwards, appearing mildly exasperated after a huddle with representatives from the three groups, said he was giving them 2 weeks to come up with a plan for a plan.

Although, as Edwards pointed out, the Red Cross and the AABB have certain "rigidities and biases" that impede agreement, they have a lot in common. Both want to develop new strategies for recruitment of voluntary blood donors so there will be enough volunteer blood available to drive commercial banks out of business (paid blood is thought to be the source of over half the cases of posttransfusion hepatitis). And both are well aware that increased use of component therapy could reduce waste and stretch the available supply—in most transfusions frozen red cells could be substituted for whole blood, thus making plasma available for other purposes. Perhaps most important, no one, including HEW, wants the federal government to take the primary responsibility for organization and administration of blood services. So the private sectors may finally decide that some sacrifice of principle in the interest of compromise is warranted.—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

hand," said an official statement. But Gillberg says that having his research funds cut was "the best thing that could have happened" to him. He described how, in the aftermath, the news media took up the case. He also received letters of support, offers of volunteer help, and financial contributions. As a result, Gillberg founded the Miljöcentrum, or environment center. Based in Uppsala, the center has laboratory facilities of its own and publishes a newspaper, *Environment and Future*. Now Gillberg estimates there are 100 other, smaller centers in Sweden, 30 in Norway, and 60 in Denmark.

Thus, Gillberg was able to continue in an organized fashion his war against optical brighteners, which are added to detergents, body soaps, and some packaging to make things "whiter than white" as the ad says, but which are also suspected of causing allergies and genetic defects. Other Miljöcentrum campaigns have focused on glutamates added to baby foods (U.S. baby food manufacturers have voluntarily stopped using glutamates); on nitrates, used to redden meats; and on bisulfates, which are added to Swedish-style precooked packaged potatoes (bisulfates are prohibited in all U.S. foods). Gillberg has also taken on Sweden's large pulp and paper industry, alleging poor performance in combating pollution.

But changing national policy isn't easy in a country where the government operates one of the most extensive social welfare systems in the world (including compulsory health insurance and health care delivery), where the courts have relatively less power than they do in the United States, and where one political party, the Social Democrats, has been in control of both the Parliament and the executive branch of government for more than 40 years. Gillberg pointed out that under Swedish laws, a citizen cannot bring a "class action" suit against the government in the way that public interest groups in the United States can. Hence, with a few exceptions, the courts do not offer a way to change government policy or to redress consumer grievances.

Further, he said, the traditional institution for ironing out citizen's gripes in Sweden, the ombudsman, has proved less than effective. He described his and the Miljöcentrum's efforts to use the ombudsman's office at the height of the controversy in the media over nitrates in meat. The Miljöcentrum went to the ombudsman, noting conflicts between its data and the government