AABB Celebrates National Blood Donor Month

National Blood Donor Month would not be possible without the contributions and dedication of the many professionals throughout the blood community. This month and every month, AABB is proud to support you and your efforts to maintain the supply of life-saving blood. Your work saves lives every day.

From our team to yours, thank you!

#NBDM #NationalBloodDonorMonth
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IDA Opens Door to New, Returning Blood Donors

New screening protocols based on individual donor assessments (IDA) are helping to expand the culture of blood donation.

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Addressing an Aging Donor Pool

As loyal donors age out, blood centers turn to younger generations to close the gap and meet the critical demand.

Editor's Note: Cover image courtesy of Stanford Blood Center. AABB News is grateful for the contribution.
Celebrating Donors All-Year Round

First, I’d like to warmly welcome you to the New Year. Our Association accomplished many milestones in 2023, and I look forward to an exciting 2024 ahead of us.

We are celebrating National Blood Donor Month this month. This observance—held every January since 1970—is intended to honor voluntary blood donors and to encourage people to give blood at a time when more of these critical resources are often needed. Although we celebrate National Blood Donor Month every January, our dedicated blood and platelet donors deserve recognition all year long for their bravery and generosity. Our community is grateful for our voluntary donors and their selfless acts to help patients in need of life-saving procedures and treatments that improve their quality of life. And, of course, we thank all of you: the professionals who work every day to ensure a safe and adequate blood supply, and those who work tirelessly to advance optimal donor and patient safety.

Highlighting Donor Recruitment and Retention

As part of AABB’s celebration of National Blood Donor Month, this issue of AABB News is focused on the importance of donor recruitment and retention. Our first feature article highlights how the newly implemented individual donor assessment screening protocols are helping to expand the culture of blood donation—a landmark achievement that will open doors for newly eligible donors. The issue’s second feature article addresses the aging donor pool and offers insight from donor recruitment professionals on effective strategies and campaigns to attract younger donors to fill the gap left by aging donors.

In addition, this issue includes a special feature for National Blood Donor Month that highlights blood donors’ and recipients’ stories, shining a spotlight on the transformative power of blood donations. Each story serves as a reminder of the important work happening in our field every day and how our community is making a difference and changing lives.

I hope this issue inspires you—now and throughout 2024!

Aaron A. R. Tobian, MD, PhD
AABB President
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Ensuring Future Research Opportunities

By Kendra Y. Applewhite, MFA
Managing Editor

“The AABB Foundation funding launched my extramurally funded research career, showing me that I could successfully obtain grant funding.”

In 2005, Brian Custer, PhD, MPH, received an early-career scientific research grant from the AABB Foundation for his research project titled, “Retrospective Cohort Analysis of Return Behavior in Temporarily Deferred and Eligible Voluntary Blood Donors.” The project led to insights into the consequences of blood donor selection policies on donor behavior, as well as ways in which the blood community could focus efforts on the next generation of blood donors.

“The purpose of my project was to understand how donor deferral impacts someone’s willingness to return. It is important research because the sufficiency of the blood supply continues to be a challenge,” Custer said. He noted the project findings revealed that many people who are deferred for common reasons—such as a low hemoglobin level or an elevated temperature—sometimes misinterpret that as a permanent deferral and never return.

“The project led to identifying areas with opportunity for improvement, including doing a better job to understand specific deferrals with scientific evidence and to improve communication with those who are temporarily deferred, particularly first-time donors,” he said. “I was pleased that the AABB Foundation was willing to support my project because it was a different topic area from many projects the Foundation has supported throughout the years.”

Early Interest in Transfusion Medicine

Custer told AABB News that he developed a strong interest in blood and blood products early on during his undergraduate studies at the University of Oregon, where he conducted research on oxygen-binding capacity of hemoglobins found in particular invertebrates. He shifted his focus from biochemistry-related studies to policy-related topics in graduate school. Custer used blood donor data from Blood Centers of the Pacific to build a mathematical model of the blood supply to understand the different factors that impacted recruiting groups of individuals based on sex, race/ethnicity and other factors.

“I wanted to understand what it took in terms of demographics, epidemiology and economics to get different individuals to come in to successfully donate. I was interested in finding a way to answer that complex question, which was closely related to the project the AABB Foundation later funded,” Custer stated.

A leading expert in epidemiology and health outcomes research focused on blood donors and transfusion recipients, Custer currently serves as the director of Vitalant Research Institute, the vice president of Research and Scientific Programs and the director of Epidemiology and Policy Science at Vitalant Research Institute (VRI) San Francisco and at Vitalant. He is also an adjunct professor in the Department of Laboratory Medicine at UCSF.

In addition, Custer is an accomplished researcher in the field of transfusion medicine with a passion to improve transfusion safety. He is a principal investigator for multiple projects funded by the National Institutes of Health; National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute; and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, including the Recipient Epidemiology and Donor Evaluation REDS-IV-P (Pediatric) studies in the U.S. and Brazil, the U.S. Transfusion Transmissible Infec-
tions Monitoring System (TTIMS), and the Assessing Donor Variability And New Concepts in Eligibility (ADVANCE) study.

**Asking the Tough Questions**

Custer recently provided a summary of the State of the Science in Transfusion Medicine (SoS in TM) at the AABB Foundation’s Research and Development Summit during the 2023 AABB Annual Meeting. His presentation highlighted the importance of identifying research questions that will help to diversify the volunteer donor pool and donor selection. Custer stressed that it is necessary to ask “the tough questions” and then be prepared for the answers.

“Diversifying the blood donor pool is a topic consistent with my AABB Foundation-funded project, but doing a database analysis like I did is not sufficient. We must ask important research questions like ‘what don’t we know and what kind of projects, analyses or research do we need to conduct to get to those answers?’” Custer explained. It is essential to understand donor motivators and the impact of health disparities for donors and recipients, he noted.

“There are other important research priorities in transfusion medicine, but we continue to struggle to make effective connections with diverse communities and younger donors,” Custer said. “People, meaning donors and patients, are at the heart of everything that we do, so it was important to focus on this research area at the R&D Summit.”

**Supporting the Mission**

Through the generosity of the blood and biotherapies community, the AABB Foundation has raised more than $11 million since its inception to fund more than 200 early-stage investigators, who have conducted impactful research on a range of medical conditions, including alloimmunization, sickle cell disease, West Nile virus, SARS Cov-2, malaria, anemia, hemophilia and many more.

Custer credits the AABB Foundation for launching his extramurally funded research career and showing him that he could successfully obtain grant funding.

“It is difficult to receive R01 or R21 federal funding as a first extramurally funded project because these grants are so competitive. The AABB Foundation’s grant awards prepare investigators in this discipline for the next phase of their research career and sets them up for future funding opportunities,” Custer noted. “Funders want to see success in both writing a compelling research proposal and generating results. The Foundation’s funding is just big enough to be impactful but also accomplishable in that one-to-two-year period. It certainly contributed to my success.”

As a long-time supporter of the AABB Foundation, Custer encourages his peers to give back and support the Foundation’s mission to ensure future opportunities for graduate students and emerging researchers. Without funding mechanisms to create research opportunities in the field of transfusion medicine and biotherapies, early-career investigators may find other paths to pursue, he pointed out.

“We need to have a group of dedicated people across different disciplines thinking about the next relevant questions in transfusion medicine and blood (Continued on page 29)