Are Blood Transfusions Really Necessary?

LAST November the above question was raised in a newspaper article written by Dr. Ciril Godec, chairman of urology at Long Island College Hospital, in Brooklyn, New York. He wrote: “Today blood would probably not be approved as a medication, since it would not fulfill safety criteria of the Food and Drug Administration. Blood is an organ of the body, and blood transfusion is nothing less than an organ transplant.”

Dr. Godec observed: “Organ transplant is the very last therapeutic option offered to patients. Because of the likelihood of severe side effects, patients are thoroughly informed about all possible alternatives before a transplant is performed.” Regarding blood transfusion, he concluded: “The benefit is so questionable that many surgeons have adopted a philosophy of ‘transfusion avoidance’ not only for medical but also for legal reasons.”

A major problem with blood transfusions is that thousands of people have been infected with deadly diseases, including AIDS. Although methods of screening blood have improved in many places, Dr. Godec pointed out: “A potential danger arises from blood donated by individuals who are infected but have not yet developed antibodies that could be detected through screening tests.”

Concluding his article, Dr. Godec addressed the question raised above: “As physicians and surgeons develop better understanding of the physiology of oxygen delivery and recognize that hemoglobin levels need not be as high as previously thought, it almost always becomes possible for them to find alternatives to transfusion. As recently as a year ago the demanding surgeries of heart and liver transplantation were fraught with such major blood loss that they were deemed always to require massive amounts of blood replacement. Now, both procedures have been performed without resort to transfusion.

“It is quite possible that in the very near future transfusion will be eliminated altogether…. Transfusion is not only costly and dangerous; it simply does not provide the highest quality of care that patients deserve.”

Awake! August 22, 1999