Physicians face a special challenge in treating Jehovah’s Witnesses. Members of this faith have deep religious convictions against accepting homologous or autologous whole blood, packed RBCs [red blood cells], WBCs [white blood cells], or platelets. Many will allow the use of (non-blood-prime) heart-lung, dialysis, or similar equipment if the extracorporeal circulation is uninterrupted. Medical personnel need not be concerned about liability, for Witnesses will take adequate legal steps to relieve liability as to their informed refusal of blood. They accept nonblood replacement fluids. Using these and other meticulous techniques, physicians are performing major surgery of all types on adult and minor Witness patients. A standard of practice for such patients has thus developed that accords with the tenet of treating the “whole person.” (JAMA 1981;246:2471-2472)

PHYSICIANS face a growing challenge that is a major health issue. There are over half a million Jehovah’s Witnesses in the United States who do not accept blood transfusions. The number of Witnesses and those associated with them is increasing. Although formerly, many physicians and hospital officials viewed refusal of a transfusion as a legal problem and sought court authorization to proceed as they believed was medically advisable, recent medical literature reveals that a notable change in attitude is occurring. This may be a result of more surgical experience with patients having very low hemoglobin levels and may also reflect increased awareness of the legal principle of informed consent.

Now, large numbers of elective surgical and trauma cases involving both adult and minor Witnesses are being managed without blood transfusions. Recently, representatives of Jehovah’s Witnesses met with surgical and administrative personnel at some of the largest medical centers in the country. These meetings improved understanding and helped resolve questions about blood salvage, transplants, and the avoidance of medical/legal confrontations.

WITNESS POSITION ON THERAPY

Jehovah’s Witnesses accept medical and surgical treatment. In fact, scores of them are physicians, even surgeons. But Witnesses are deeply religious people who believe that blood transfusion is forbidden for them by Biblical passages such as: “Only flesh with its soul—its blood—you must not eat” (Genesis 9:3-4); “[You must] pour its blood out and cover it with dust” (Leviticus 17:13-14); and “Abstain from . . . fomization and from what is strangled and from blood” (Acts 15:19-21).

While these verses are not stated in medical terms, Witnesses view them as ruling out transfusion of whole blood, packed RBCs, and plasma, as well as WBC and platelet administration. However, Witnesses’ religious understanding does not absolutely prohibit the use of components such as albumin, immune globulins, and hemophiliac preparations; each Witness must decide individually if he can accept these.

Witnesses believe that blood removed from the body should be disposed of, so they do not accept autotransfusion of predesitosed blood. Techniques for intraoperative collection or hemodilution that involve blood storage are objectionable to them. However, many Witnesses permit the use of dialysis and heart-lung equipment (non-blood-prime) as well as intraoperative salvage where the extracorporeal circulation is uninterrupted; the physician should consult with the individual patient as to what his conscience dictates.