

Assessment of Blood Transfusion Services in Iraq

Briefing Report

February 2019



Background

Universal Health Coverage (UHC) includes appropriate access to affordable and quality-assured blood and blood products, which are already included in the WHO List of Essential Medicines.

Preliminary findings based on field visits and discussions with Iraq professionals reveal that about 500,000 units of blood are collected annually (meets WHO requirement of 10 collection per 1000 population). However, safety is a major concern. Blood is collected largely from unsafe blood donor pool, i.e., family-replacement and hidden paid blood donors. Rational use of blood is yet to be developed. 20-40% of the blood supply is used for thalassemia patients.

While initiatives have been taken to develop a safe and sustainable national blood system, which consists of three sub-systems: (a) **regulatory system** (National Blood Transfusion Service); (b) **supply system** (National Blood Transfusion Center and Governorate Blood Banks); and (c) **transfusion system** (hospitals), much remain to be done.

Recent WHO technical support

Upon the request of the Ministry of Health, WHO technical support missions were conducted in 2011, 2016 and 2019. In addition, regular supportive visits were conducted by WHO CO, most recent in January 2019. The challenges identified in the three missions are similar.

Challenges

Organization and governance issues

- The blood regulatory system (NBTS), including legislations, regulations, and standards enforced by a competent regulatory body, is not well developed and not fully functional. Consequently, the blood banks and hospitals are largely unregulated. Management of blood and blood products as essential medicines demands that these products are appropriately regulated.
- Shortage of finances – appropriate financing mechanisms.

Coordination and collaboration

- The blood supply and the blood transfusion systems remain highly decentralized, uncoordinated. Decentralized decision making both at policy and operational levels affects quality and safety. In addition, coordination between blood banks and hospitals is not yet developed.

Operational issues

- Frequent interruptions of supplies (consumables and reagents).
- Voluntary blood donation programme is not in place.

The way forward

Long term – organization and governance

- Proper organization and effective management of the blood system, with clearly defined responsibilities for the blood regulatory, supply and transfusion systems. These responsibilities have to be defined in a blood legislation enforced by a well-organized and supported regulator/authority to provide comprehensive oversight of the vein-to-vein system.

Medium term – coordination and collaboration

- Establish a mechanism for collaboration between the blood supply and transfusion systems to align demand, supply and utilization; between the blood regulatory system and other health and medicines regulatory systems to establish effective regulation for blood products, in-vitro diagnostics, associated substances and medical devices; and between the blood supply system and blood donor organizations, patient association and the community at large in promoting voluntary blood donation.
- Establish effective coordination among blood banks in the country with consolidation (centralization) of critical activities under the leadership of the NBTC – to ensure uniform and consistent implementation of standards and documentation at operational level.

Short term – operational issues

- Make the NBTS fully functional by providing necessary support (e.g., adequate number of competent staff) to enable comprehensive oversight of the entire blood system and ensure that blood banks are legally accountable for the safety and quality of blood and blood products.
- Establish a blood donation programme based on voluntary, unpaid and regular blood donations, including a programme for converting family replacement donors to regular voluntary donors.
- Dedicated procurement list for the blood system, separate from the procurement list for laboratories and other health care departments.
- Advocacy and awareness-raising efforts are needed targeting politicians, decision makers, Ministry of Finance to obtain adequate financing to ensure the safety, availability and quality of blood supply and transfusion systems.