

Technology to allow bloodless surgery?

 By Dr. Jay Adlersberg

(New York-WABC, January 19, 2007) - During many surgeries, doctors pump several units of donated blood into their patients. But what if the blood isn't available? The American Red Cross reports donations are not keeping up with increased demand. Now there's a push to use fewer transfusions, and technology is making it possible.

Some donated blood is sitting out the next surgery, and it's a major operation that would usually need it. But Dale Reisner has decided not to use donor blood during her open heart surgery.

"It's a precious resource," she said. "It's a limited commodity."

As a surgeon herself, Reisner knows how limited the blood supply can be.

"It's really used best for trauma and acute surgical emergencies," she said.

Bloodless surgery used to mostly be requested by Jehovah's Witnesses. Now, more than 25 percent of patients asking for no donor blood do so for non-religious reasons. Studies show transfusions lead to more infections and complications.

"We're probably using blood transfusions too commonly and too regularly and using it for patients who don't need it," said Dr. Lori Heller, a bloodless surgery expert at Swedish Medical Center in Seattle.

For weeks, Reisner had hormone injections to boost her blood count. Now, doctors will transfuse her with her own blood during the surgery, if she needs it.

Other ways to avoid transfusions: During the surgery, a cell salvage machine collects blood, spins it, washes it, filters it and returns the patient's own red blood cells.

"It prevents many transfusions and the patient having to receive banked blood," Dr. Heller said.

New blood testing techniques only need a drop, rather than a whole tube, of the patient's blood. And all of these techniques mean safer surgeries, and they also save a precious resource for emergencies.

About 14 million units of blood were used last year in the United States. The American Red Cross reports donations are increasing by about 3 percent annually in the United States, but demand is climbing by between 6 percent and 8 percent as an aging population requires more operations that often involve blood transfusion.

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