

Anne Sanderson reviews subtle changes in the Jehovah's Witnesses' blood transfusion policy.

Blood Feud

Last June the media heard of an apparent change in Jehovah's Witnesses' blood policy.¹ The subsequent headlines prompted a statement from the Watch Tower Society. 'There is no "U-turn"', they insisted. 'Nothing major has changed, there's only a slight difference in how we deal with members who deviate from our official view on blood treatments. The policy itself has not changed.'^{2,3} However, people with knowledge of how the Society moves its goal-posts were not convinced. The Society said that congregation and hospital liaison elders had been briefed but it seemed that Jehovah's Witnesses (JWs) did not know anything about the matter.^{4,5,6} The official *Watchtower* magazine didn't mention the issue. Why not?

The answer seems to be linked to a legal requirement the Society had entered into with the Bulgarian government in order to be re-registered as a religion. In return for the Bulgarians arranging alternative service (instead of prison) to JWs who refused conscription, the Society had promised not to sanction members who wanted blood. This news spread via the internet and soon became public knowledge,⁷ apparently prompting the Society to guarantee this concession to all members world-wide. However, as members have been discouraged from looking at Internet sites that criticise it, the Society must have felt confident enough to proceed without informing rank and file members.^{8,9}

The Society's wording of their policy change was very cautious: they would no longer disfellowship members who repented of taking blood. However, they have never claimed to reject a member who repents of an alleged sin. No, the real change lies in a new approach to members who show (eg by accepting blood) that they disagree with a core teaching. Such members are now viewed as having dissociated themselves, so official action is not required. What the public doesn't realise is that shunning tactics can be

employed against both the dissociated and the disfellowshipped.¹⁰ So, despite toning down official sanctions, the end result is virtually the same: a JW known to have taken blood will be shunned.

Another subtle change came with the Society adding more blood products such as interferons and interleukins to its 'acceptable' list.¹¹ The *BMJ* carried an article on this, mentioning that products derived from 'prohibited' cellular components were also listed. The possible implications of haemoglobin-based blood substitutes being introduced into general use were also discussed.¹² The Society claims that individual members are free to exercise their consciences on such matters, so those who *do* want blood-based treatments should be helped to ensure confidentiality in order to avoid congregational judgment. Unfortunately, members have been encouraged to break confidentiality and ensure that elders get to know of serious sin such as abortion, fornication or taking these 'disapproved' blood treatments.¹³

The *BMJ* article has generated considerable correspondence on the *BMJ* web-pages. Of note are the comments of JWs who have to work anonymously from within the religion for reform on this issue. The founder of this movement said, 'As recently as this week (28 January 2001)...members were once again indoctrinated on 'apostasy' and the need to shun completely anyone who disagrees with the channel that God is using to communicate with his people - the Watchtower Society.'¹⁴

Helped by public debate, the tide is slowly turning. More and more JWs are realising the indefensible nature of its Society's ever-changing pronouncements on life and death matters. Thinking JWs see the need to test the Society's claim that they are free to choose. Clinicians need to know what's really going on so they can ensure that JW patients make independent choices, free from fear or pressure.

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The Bible and Blood

Jehovah's Witnesses argue that transfusion involves the use of blood as a nutrient and base their objection to it on three biblical passages forbidding blood ingestion: Genesis 9:4, Leviticus 17:11-14 and Acts 15:20, 29.

But both Genesis 9:4 and Leviticus 17:11-14 clearly relate to the blood of animals and birds killed for food or sacrifice and make no mention of human blood. Similarly in Acts 15:20,29, the Jerusalem Council's edict to 'abstain from...blood' makes no suggestion that human blood is being implicated. Furthermore this was a command primarily aimed at maintaining peace between early Christians from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds.

Christians are not under Mosaic Law today (see Galatians 3:23-25; Colossians 2:13-15) but even in the Old Testament the punishment for blood ingestion was not excommunication, but simply to bathe and wait until evening when one would be considered 'clean' (Leviticus 17:15,16). The Jehovah's Witnesses position is not biblically defensible.

Under the Old Covenant blood shed in animal sacrifices was sacred, epitomising the life of the sacrificial victim, and therefore had to be treated with respect. But its real significance was to point forward to the blood of the Lamb of God (Jesus Christ), who obtained 'eternal redemption' for his people (Hebrews 9:12) through shedding his own blood on the cross.

It is tragic that the Watchtower Society's policy denies Jehovah's Witnesses life-saving transfusions. But there is a greater tragedy. Failing to understand the deeper meaning of Old Testament blood laws may mean they also fail to find personal salvation in Christ. (www.cmf.org.uk/pubs/nucleus/nucoct93/jehovah.htm)

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