

## **Regulation of Plasma Products**

Honorary Pamela Wallin – Honorary Jane Philpott

**Hon. Pamela Wallin:** Minister, thank you for being with us today.

I think all of us in this chamber are old enough to remember the sad history of the tainted blood scandal that cost hundreds of lives. As a result, our national blood system operator, the Canadian Blood Services, was created in 1998. It's expanding its plasma-collection efforts to secure a safe blood supply.

However, Health Canada's approval of a controversial private plasma broker in Saskatchewan, which will directly compete with the CBS and could cause a deficit of supply as private brokers export plasma out of Canada, and given that this activity is against the law in Ontario and Quebec — and I know there are other provinces considering this — why has the government granted a licence to this company? Is it ever revisited?

**Hon. Jane Philpott, P.C., M.P., Minister of Health:** I thank you for this question. It's a good question. The Senate is a very good place to have a conversation about that, because you can have a lengthier explanation. This is a bit of a complicated matter, but thank you, first of all, for raising the challenges that our country has faced in the past as it relates to blood products.

Plasma collection is different from blood collection. It's run now by CBS and in Quebec by Héma-Québec. We have one of the safest blood supply systems in the world, in large part because there were serious errors made in the past and we had to correct our ways. So this is something extremely serious.

The matter of plasma requires some particular understanding. Plasma protein products are essential for the treatment of life-threatening conditions, including hemophilia. The unfortunate reality is that in this country, as in many countries, the need for this to save the lives of people with hemophilia and other illnesses far outstrips the supply through voluntary donations.

This is a huge challenge. About 70 per cent of the supply of plasma protein products given to Canadian patients is purchased from outside the country, from companies in the U.S. In fact, the majority of plasma protein products manufactured in the U.S. are from sources where donors have been compensated in some measure for the donation. This is the reality we face.

The good news is that international bodies have studied this, including an international Dublin Consensus on the matter, which has documented proof that in terms of the safety of supply of

plasma protein products, regarding whether or not a donor is compensated, there is no evidence that it has any impact on the safety of the product.

I hope that will give you some reassurance on the safety and the need to make sure people will have the product they need.

The responsibility of Health Canada is to make sure that we test that the facilities are safe and regulated. All across the country, facilities that collect plasma, as well as blood products, are regulated by Health Canada.

The decision about a specific clinic, whether it can operate and whether it can compensate donors — and they compensate them with something like a \$25 gift card for groceries, for example — those decisions are not made by Health Canada but by the provinces and territories within which those clinics rest.

We're always happy to have conversations about making sure that the decisions made are appropriate. I've examined this in great detail, because I have been asked about this many times. I want Canadians to be absolutely assured that the blood supply in this country is safe and that plasma protein products used in this country are safe.

**Hon. Pamela Wallin:** On a brief supplementary, I'm not even raising that question. I agree that the standards are quite high.

The issue is that we know there is provincial jurisdiction, but you are the licence-granter. Because several provinces indicated that they don't support or like this activity, is there any reconsideration of this on your part in terms of licence-granting?

**Hon. Jane Philpott, P.C., M.P., Minister of Health:** To clarify, Health Canada determines whether the facility is appropriately run and should be allowed to function. The decision in terms of which particular clinics can be opened and whether those clinics compensate is a matter of provincial jurisdiction. People are free to speak to those particular provinces.

I think it's an issue in that we as parliamentarians and as Canadians need to find more creative ways to encourage Canadians to donate blood and plasma. It's really unfortunate that we can't manage to get voluntary donations to meet the very serious need for plasma protein products, so I encourage all senators to find ways to donate blood and plasma as soon as possible.