

Jehovah's Witnesses Accepting Blood Transfusion

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That Jehovah's Witnesses have refused life saving transfusions of certain products from blood is well known and documented in medical literature. It is also documented within the medical community that Witnesses have accepted transfusions of whole blood and other products from blood forbidden by the religion's leadership. The reason for this acceptance is simple: the population of Jehovah's Witnesses has never fully assented to the organization's religious position on blood.

The controlling organizational body of this religious community is the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, Inc. (Watchtower). Since at least 1927 Watchtower has been teaching its membership that they should not eat blood.¹

As though eating is tantamount to transfusion, in 1944 Watchtower made an assertion that initiated development of its doctrine against accepting blood transfusion. Watchtower wrote:

“Not only as a descendant of Noah, but now also as one bound by God's law to Israel which incorporated the everlasting covenant regarding the sanctity of life-sustaining blood, the stranger was forbidden to eat or drink blood, whether by transfusion or by the mouth.”²

Thus in 1944 was Watchtower's first statement against blood transfusion. This position was addressed at greater length in 1945 in the religion's literature.³ From this point forward Watchtower regularly taught it was a gross disrespect of God's will to accept transfusion of blood.⁴

Researchers and professionals in various fields of study have written extensively on this subject in terms of members refusing blood transfusion. In contrast the subject of division within this religious community is comparatively neglected in terms of Jehovah's Witnesses accepting blood transfusion. Yet from the *very beginning* of Watchtower's blood transfusion taboo, members within the religion have expressed disagreement with the official position.

Internal disagreement

During the Nazi regime of the 1930s and 40s Jehovah's Witnesses in Eastern Europe suffered horrendous persecution up to and including death in concentration camps.⁵ These members were willing to suffer because of their sense of Christian faithfulness. Willingness to suffer for their faith is notable in this discussion of blood because of a record of events from the Ravensbrueck camp. According to her eyewitness account, author Margaret Buber shared that all of the Jehovah's Witnesses (known then as Bible Students) in the camp were willing to eat blood sausage, until about 1943.⁶ Despite Watchtower having taught for at least the previous 15 years that members should not eat blood, these members apparently saw nothing wrong with eating blood. Buber reports that in 1943 an “extremist” among the Witnesses found it biblically unacceptable to eat blood. According to Buber this resulted in 25 of the 275 Witness prisoners refusing to eat blood sausage. So we have a group of

religious faithful who were willing to suffer and even die for their faith, yet the vast majority ate blood despite religious teaching against it, despite a minority of fellow worshippers on hand who refused for biblical reasons, and despite having options of what to eat. Gertrude Poetzinger, a longtime and reputable Jehovah's Witness, confirms Buber's account of life at Ravensbrueck among her religious group. Gertrude Poetzinger was herself confined to Ravensbrueck for 4 years, and later on was stationed at Watchtower's world headquarters with her husband who was a member of the religion's top Governing Body.⁷

In 1945 Watchtower published the first article addressing the organization's blood doctrine in great detail. Therein we find the following statement speaking of the 1944 instance of Watchtower disapproving of blood transfusion,

“That article made reference to God's command to his consecrated people not to eat or drinking blood. In commenting thereon, some Watchtower readers have said that such prohibition against eating and drinking blood applied only to the Jews under the Mosaic law covenant but not to Christians who are under the new covenant.”⁸

Hence starting with Watchtower's *first instance* of teaching against blood transfusion we find members of the religion disagreeing with the doctrinal position, saying the position was not applicable to Christians.

Disagreement from the religion's membership did not cease despite repeated instruction from Watchtower that transfusion was sinful. In 1949 the organization published another extensive article on the subject.⁹ This resulted in Watchtower again receiving letters from its membership expressing disagreement, and the organization responded by publishing replies in its primary journal *The Watchtower*.¹⁰ Of its position against transfusion of blood, one of these letters from Watchtower states,

“Our statements have not caused any more division of opinion upon the subject than existed before we said anything about it.”¹¹

With that remark Watchtower confirmed the existence of division among Jehovah's Witnesses in relation to its blood doctrine. Characterizing the extent of replies disputing Watchtower's teaching against blood transfusion, the same letter states,

“Repeatedly we are confronted with requests for information on blood transfusion, particularly for us to pronounce a sanction of this medical practice.”¹²

Internal division on Watchtower's blood doctrine led to some Witnesses *refusing* blood transfusions and others *accepting* blood transfusions.¹³

Internal disagreement despite severe personal repercussion

In 1961 Watchtower began enforcing its doctrinal position on blood among Jehovah's Witnesses. That is, members who conscientiously accept blood transfusion were made subject to the organization's organized communal shunning policy. This shunning is severe. It requires members to avoid all social fellowship with the individual. Even immediate family members who do not live in the same house are to shun the individual by avoiding association, including keeping even family business dealings to an “absolute minimum”. In effect, this shunning transforms the target individual into a social outcast who should not be recognized with as much as a “Hello”.¹⁴ This shunning is imposed for life or until the

individual “repents” of their sin, whichever comes first.¹⁵ Despite this severe personal threat for conscientious acceptance of blood transfusion, Witnesses continued accepting the therapy anyway.¹⁶

In the last few years hundreds of Watchtower's internal organizational letters have been made public. In these letters the religion's leadership expresses serious concern regarding Jehovah's Witnesses activating and maintaining documents important to avoiding transfusion against Watchtower's doctrine. A 1993 letter cites reports that up to 50% of the membership had failed to maintain up-to-date Medical Directive cards leaving members unprotected from routine transfusions.¹⁷ A 2000 letter reports that a large majority of Jehovah's Witnesses had not completed Watchtower's provided Durable Power of Attorney document for members that would require medical providers to refrain from administering blood to the individual.¹⁸ These failures were in the face of decades of the religion teaching its membership that completing such documentation is crucial.¹⁹

In a series of letters written between 1998 and 2003 a Watchtower appointed official wrote the religion's leadership arguing that blood transfusions should not be prohibited by church doctrine. Watchtower understood this church official rejected its blood doctrine by admitting in response to him,

“Your reasoning has led you to conclude that the medical use of blood from live donors would not be prohibited.”²⁰

A 2004 letter to Watchtower by another appointed official expressed similar disagreement with church teaching.²¹

External observation

External sources document that Jehovah's Witnesses do not uniformly support Watchtower's blood doctrine.

In 1982 Drs Larry J. Findley and Paul M. Redstone surveyed a congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses to evaluate individual belief regarding Watchtower's blood doctrine.²² Watchtower appointed officials in the congregation knew of the survey and cooperated by supplying contact information. The result found that about 10% of the respondents would accept blood products forbidden by the church's doctrine. Because congregation members knew local elders would see the survey results, Findley and Redstone share an opinion of their finding by stating,

“Our research methods are open to sample bias. By surveying only church members, we may not have described the beliefs of less religious Jehovah's Witnesses. Although we stressed the strict confidentiality of the questionnaire, the members knew that the church had cooperated in the study to the point of supplying a list of the names and addresses of its members. This may have influenced their answers.”

Hence, if anything the finding by Findley and Redstone is an understatement of how many among Jehovah's Witnesses are willing to accept blood products forbidden under Watchtower's doctrine.

In 1995 Dr. Kaaron Benson found that most parents among Jehovah's Witnesses permitted transfusions for their minor children, and that many younger adults made the same choice for themselves.²³ Overall she found that about 10% of the Witness patients or their guardians were willing to accept blood transfusion.

In their 2004 review of documents completed by 61 pregnant Jehovah's Witness from 1997 to 2002, Drs Cynthia Gyamfi and Richard L. Berkowitz found that about 10% of these patients were willing to accept specific transfusion therapies contrary to the religion's policy.²⁴ Gyamfi and Berkowitz concluded overall,

“This review refutes the commonly held belief that all Jehovah's Witnesses refuse to accept blood or any of its products. In this population of pregnant women, the majority were willing to accept some form of blood or blood products.”

In the book *Transfusion-Free Medicine and Surgery* authors Randy Henderson, Nicolas Jabbour, MD and Gary Zeger, MD apparently recognize that not all Jehovah's Witnesses agree with Watchtower's blood doctrine by stating “These primary components are unacceptable to *devout* Jehovah's Witnesses.”²⁵ (Italic added)

Conclusion

Though the Watchtower organization frequently asserts the population of Jehovah's Witnesses uniformly accepts and abides by its blood doctrine, the fact is the religion's community has always been divided on this issue between those believing it *wrong* and those believing it *right* to accept blood transfusions. Based on what medical reviews are available, it is safe to say there is a strong and consistent minority among Jehovah's Witnesses who believe it acceptable to have blood transfusion therapy. This is also consistent with anecdotal experience among clinicians. Based on internal Watchtower letters the level of dissent may be much higher, potentially even a majority of the membership. Until the religion's leadership ceases its policing and shunning policy for members who conscientiously accept blood transfusion, whatever is the majority view will be difficult to assess.²⁶ Only after this coercive policy changes will members be free to openly express disagreement with the present doctrine and openly accept blood transfusion.

It is a myth that *all* Jehovah's Witnesses refuse blood transfusion. Many members of this religious community do not believe it wrong to accept blood transfusion therapy. Given the Watchtower organization's police-state policy of having members report “sin” by fellow members, and the resulting vulnerability of being made subject to the religion's severe organized communal shunning policy, medical providers should take care that each patient presenting as one of Jehovah's Witnesses has ample opportunity to express their personal preferences of treatment outside the presence of any other member of the faith, including close family members.

It is as Drs Gyamfi and Berkowitz write:

“It is naive to assume that all people in any religious group share the exact same beliefs, regardless of doctrine. It is well known that Muslims, Jews, and Christians have significant individual variations in their beliefs. Why should that not also be true for Jehovah's Witnesses?”²⁷

It *is* true of Jehovah's Witnesses. Not all of them agree with the leadership's religious position on blood transfusion.



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 - 11 The Watchtower, *Letter*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, May 1, 1950 pp 143-144
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