

## HEALTH

# Expat Groups Crowd-Source Answers to Blood-Supply Shortages

For expats with uncommon blood types, uncommon solutions are sometimes required



Bus for blood donating in Latin America. PHOTO: ISTOCK

By *Karen Catchpole*

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In 2010, Susan Netherton, a U.S. expat who was living near Lake Chapala in Mexico, found herself in a medical emergency.

She needed a blood transfusion after a surgery-induced infection, but there was no match in the hospital's blood bank for her O-negative blood. An urgent call for O-negative donors went out to area friends and on Facebook, TV and the radio. More than three days passed before she got the blood she needed.

While Ms. Netherton ultimately recovered, her dilemma highlights a potential concern for many expats around the world.

Since blood types are based in genetics, many countries have limited supplies of blood types uncommon to certain ethnic groups. In addition, the tradition of donating blood, which keeps blood banks relatively well-stocked in the U.S., is less common in other countries. Finally, some countries have stringent rules about who can donate blood.

For expats with uncommon blood types, that can require uncommon solutions.

In the U.S., being O, A, B or AB-negative (also called Rhesus Negative or Rh-negative) isn't usually a problem since there are usually enough donations of every type. Women with Rh-negative blood require a special injection after every pregnancy, and anyone with Rh-negative blood must receive transfusions of matching blood types. An Oklahoma Blood Institute study estimated that 18% of the U.S. population is Rh-negative and, therefore, 18% of in-country blood donors are Rh-negative.

Outside of the U.S., though, some blood types are much more scarce. The World Health Organization says all Rh-negative blood types are scarce in Asian and Latin-American countries, while A-negative and B-negative are hard to find in France. According to a study produced by RhesusNegative.com, more than half of the Mexican population has O+ blood, while those with Rh-negative blood of any type totals less than 6% of the population.

Genetic scarcity of Rh-negative blood in Mexico contributed to Ms. Netherton's medical emergency. Another issue in Latin America involves the sometimes cumbersome rules

about donating. Potential donors are required to meet a battery of qualifications, which can include, according to Ms. Netherton's hospital, no tattoos within the past 12 months, no menstruating or lactating female donors and no medication—not even aspirin—within the previous three days. That last requirement ruled out at least one donor who was otherwise a match for her. That donor was me.

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Another contributing factor is the lack of routine blood donation in many countries outside the U.S. According to the 2013 blood survey from the nonprofit AABB, 68.5 million donors in the U.S. gave a total of 13.6 million units of blood that year. The WHO says that

high-income countries, such as the U.S., register 33.1 donations per 1,000 people while middle-income countries register 11.7 donations per 1,000. Low-income countries register just 4.6 donations per 1,000.

Many Latinos say they prefer to donate blood by self-donating prior to scheduled medical procedures or by corraling friends and family to donate the amount needed in an emergency. This works fine for those who are surrounded by people with compatible blood types. But since the most reliable matches are close relatives, expats can find themselves far from those relatives. Many Latin countries also require that blood donors be younger than 65, which can further complicate things among the expats who are post-retirement age.

Expats living in Latin countries are increasingly coming up with their own innovative solutions to blood-supply issues.

In Chapala, Mexico, the same area where Ms. Netherton was living when she had her blood emergency, Dr. Santiago Hernandez runs a practice called ChapalaMed. He says that 10% of his expat patients have experienced trouble finding appropriate blood supplies. Ben White, president of the Lake Chapala Society, is working with the local chapter of the Red Cross to compile a list of local residents, along with their blood type, who are willing to donate blood.

“Our objective is to get our members and members of our local community to register on this donation list,” says Mr. White. “When an emergency occurs, a call would be placed to our blood donation line and we will contact matching donors and ask them to give blood for a specific person.”

After having trouble finding the type of blood he needed in Guayaquil, Ecuador, expat Nicholas Crowder formed a Facebook group called Ecuador Emergency. It has more than 2,200 members and acts as an emergency clearinghouse, including blood donations needed by members.

Pamela Thompson, a medical treatment facilitator with Health Care Resources in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, regularly casts a wide net, which includes canvassing members of the U.S. armed forces stationed nearby, to find appropriate donors for her clients, which include expats and locals.

In Cotacachi, Ecuador expats have created what they call “health pods” of area expats who agree to go to bat when a fellow member has a medical need. “Groups of neighbors or friends share their health information including blood type,” explains U.S. expat Wendy Hetlet DeChambeau, who lives in Cotacachi. “If someone is in desperate need of AB-negative blood, for example, I could easily put the word out to the local expat community.”

In Panama, expats are encouraged to “like” a Facebook page called Sangre Panama (*sangre* is the Spanish word for blood) on which members like expat Gary Moore encourage routine blood donation and respond to blood needs.

Finally, there's one more international source of help. The WHO recommends that expats who are having trouble getting a supply of their blood type should tap into the worldwide resources of the Rare Blood Donor Working Party of the International Society of Blood Transfusion to help locate scarce blood types in emergencies.



*In 2006 Karen Catchpole left her job and apartment in New York City and embarked on the ongoing Trans-Americas Journey working road trip through North, Central and South America. Her freelance work from the road has appeared in Travel + Leisure, National Geographic Traveler, Afar, WSJ. magazine, the Dallas Morning News, BBC Travel, RoadsandKingdoms.com and many other outlets. Follow along on the Trans-Americas Journey travel blog.*

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