



SOCIAL POLICY COMMISSION 19/20

Meeting #2

University of Malta, Take-off Building
8th August 2019, 17.00.

Agenda

Registration

- Approval of Agenda
- Approval of Minutes
- Upcoming Events
- Blood Donation

Katrina Farrugia | Social Policy Commissioner: Good afternoon and thank you for coming, we are going to start the second KPS meeting.

Katrina Farrugia | Social Policy Commissioner: Approval of the agenda.

Agenda has been approved 17.17.

Katrina Farrugia | Social Policy Commissioner: Approval of the minutes.

Minutes have been approved 17.17.

Katrina Farrugia | Social Policy Commissioner: The first thing on the agenda is the upcoming events; we will be having a convention this Saturday called Share the Vision. This event has been planned especially for executive members of organisations and student representatives. As you may already know, we will be having various speakers such as Agenzija Zghazagh and EUPA, the bookings have now closed and if you are coming you can pay at the KSU office until tomorrow or you can pay at the event, the cost is of five euro. We also have our Lejla Sajfija coming up which is a barbeque especially hosted for you, the organisations, and it is a great platform by which you can interact with other organisation executive members.

Next up is blood donation, which is the topic for today. As you may already know, currently there is an issue with blood donors who identify as gay are not allowed to give blood. I have done some research about blood donation and about people who are gay who give blood, so I will tell you a bit about what I have found and after we will discuss if we should release our opinion, either to keep it as it is, to change it, or to amend anything that is in the policy. So, basically in Malta blood is tested for Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C, Syphilis and HIV. Now the whole controversy is due to HIV, the difference between HIV and AIDS for some of you that may now know is that HIV is the virus and AIDS is the disease. It is an immunodeficiency disease where one can contract various illnesses. Previously the policy in Malta was not that they cannot give blood if they are abstinent for 12 months, but they couldn't give blood at all. Now there has been an introduction of new technology equipment and there has been an introduction



of NAT testing which is basically can detect HIV in the blood from up to 9 days. So, one can know if they have HIV after 9 days from possible exposure to it. During normal blood tests generally HIV, can be spotted after 3 months, so if one contracts HIV during January, and in February he goes to do a blood test, generally it isn't spotted, however in NAT testing it can be detected in from just nine days after. Now, the controversy around gay people giving blood, is that HIV is predominantly found in males. This is due to the fact that if one has male to male sex there is a higher chance of contracting HIV due to the bacteria and due to a higher risk of blood contact. Generally, HIV is contracted either through blood fluids, through infected tattoos or body piercings, and also when having unprotected sex with an infected partner. So, in reality it is not only males who can contract HIV but also females, however the general rule is that females aren't usually so closely screened as much as males, so what we wanted to raise during this meeting is it true that homosexuals are being over screened, and heterosexuals are being under screened. So, we will be starting the discussion, maybe you can discuss if you think that homosexuals are being over screened and if the 12-month period be overruled.

Ian Padovani | ALLT: I would begin to personally say that it is a kind of arbitrary decision at this point, to choose whether men who have sex with men are over screened. Because, yes HIV is much easier spread with men who have sex with men, but at the same time everyone else are also susceptible of contracting HIV as long as they have sex. There is no real way of determining that unless you actually check, but only checking gay people doesn't really make sense, it is not thorough, it is specifically targeted at one community, when all communities face this problem. Also, I do not understand why the time period is 12 months, that does not make any sense to me, to the fact that even the older tests only take 3 months and the new tests take less than 2 weeks, why wait a full year? A shorter timeframe will make more sense, and also if you are going to specify that people will have to be abstinent for a certain amount of time it should be applied to all rather than one specific group.

Adam McCarthy | JEF: I believe that if they decrease the amount of time that they are required to stay abstinent, however at the same time there should still be a small amount of time after the three months have passed, so it would make sense if the time period would be 4 months. This is due to the fact that in reality there should still be a required amount of time before the test itself is detected. Now with the new technology, unless we are one hundred percent sure that the new technology is going to be used we cannot just shorten the amount of time one should be abstinent. So, I believe four months should be enough. This being said they should also increase screening to all.

Nicholas Aquilina | MHSA: The one year is the European standard, are you aware of how long it was before the previous amendment?

Katrina Farrugia | Social Policy Commissioner: In reality it used to be thirty years, and then it was turned into a year.

Abigail Galea | ALLT: I think making people be abstinent for a whole year is really unrealistic, I think that this is very discouraging for gay people to actually donate blood, and in reality it will just decrease blood donors in general. It is unrealistic to expect that people will go for a year of abstinence just to donate blood. If they want people to donate blood this is not a step in the right direction.



What about heterosexuals being under screened, or people who are in a relationship or aren't having sex?

Ian Padovani | ALLT: Can I ask what is the exact screening protocol for heterosexuals?

Katrina Farrugia | Social Policy Commissioner: All blood is screened, as I said they are screened for Hep B, Hep C, syphilis, and HIV. However, there is not as much restriction on heterosexuals.

Ben Cassar | JEF: I believe the policy at the moment is that if you had a stable partner in the past 6 months you are eligible to give blood, so that's already happening. There is a certain level of safety in the sense that if you're being promiscuous, don't donate blood, since you are more likely to contract STDs.

Louanne Grima | Betapsi : Do they ask you whether you are gay or not?

Katrina Farrugia | Social Policy Commissioner: They ask you about how many sexual partners you have.

Louanne Grima | Betapsi: Because you can lie about it.

Ben Cassar | JEF: If you're giving blood, generally you have good intentions.

Ben Cassar | JEF: The protocol abroad is similar, but shorter time frame; France is 4 months, UK and Canada are 6 months.

Abigail Galea | ALLT: To answer the previously asked question, I think it is more an argument of over screening homosexuals rather than under screening heterosexuals, because you have to have a professional level of safety. You can't risk people getting HIV from a blood transfusion. Ultimately Regis it is safe to have a good amount of testing.

Katrina Farrugia | Social Policy Commissioner: May we ask what the medical students think about this?

Jake: I think the mentality that gay men are more promiscuous is very archaic. I believe that in the 1980s there was an instance where there was HIV infected blood given to a number of patients. During that time there was a rising belief that gay men are more promiscuous, and most probably the laws arise from that instance in 1980. As we moved on to this age, I think heterosexual people, are at least as promiscuous as homosexual people. What we should do is move towards shifting the mentality.

Louanne Grima | Betapsi: In reality mentality is very difficult to change.

Adam McCarthy | JEF: But it's not the mentality in reality it's the law.

Katrina Farrugia | Social Policy Commissioner: At the end of the day if the law states this about gay people, its enforcing other's people ideology, as well.

Nicholas Aquilina | MHSA: What was the exact reasoning behind the 12-month abstinence period?



Katrina Farrugia | Social Policy Commissioner: To be honest when I did my research, I did not find a conclusive reason behind why they chose to opt for the 12-month period, all that I found out was that with NAT testing detect it in 9 days.

Matthew Cilia | USPA: I think that for heterosexuals it should also be abstinence rather than allowing blood donation when they have been with the same sexual partner, because people cheat.

Ben Cassar | JEF: I think we should actually go the other way around and say that homosexuals should be allowed to donate when you've been having sex with the same person, for 6 months. If you're going to say abstinence for everyone for a whole year people just wouldn't donate.

Matthew Cilia | USPA: Yes, but what I was saying is that they should reduce the time as well.

Katrina Farrugia | Social Policy Commissioner: The problem with that is that, there will still be a lot of people who would not donate blood, and they are also sort-of promoting that they are in need of a specific type of blood. So, the more restrictions there are, the worse it is going to get.

Faith Spearing | ESO: an organisation we understand that there should be a time period should be decreased, but also laws are laws, you cannot go against the law. I understand the mentality, but I think we need to move forward with it, since most of the people would not understand the clinical implications as much as doctors, who are more intelligent in this regard than any of us here. It gives you a bit to think about, I mean yes, we should push it, but there is a certain limit how far you can go with it, the people's mentality is different than the rest of us in this room. Sometimes we tend to think that we live in bubble, when there is the outside world too. So, I do agree with everyone, however there is always the fact that if someone is at risk you have to screen them especially when there is someone else's health on line. This being said I still believe that there should be one system for everyone, and if someone is a bit more high-risk, then yes definitely we should go for the safe option.

Katrina Farrugia | Social Policy Commissioner: Basically, we all agree that the time should be decreased. When it comes to over and under-screening, there was not a lot of agreement between the organisation. So maybe we should take a vote on the abstinence and then we take a separate vote on whether we should start to screen more or to screen less.

As for the abstinence time being decreased shall we discuss the exact time period of proposal?

Nicholas Aquilina | MHSA: The other European countries, is there an exact number on their abstinence periods? As in, did they face a similar problem as Malta?

Katrina Farrugia | Social Policy Commissioner: When I did my research I did not find, most of them have 12 months since it's a European standard.

Ben Cassar | JEF: The UK is 3 months, France is 4 months and Canada is 6 months.

Nicholas Aquilina | MHSA: The countries which have reduced it to 3 or 4 months, did they find a big problem when they amended the time period?



Katrina Farrugia | Social Policy Commissioner: Probably if they did, it would have increased, not stayed the same. I'm assuming in this case, because I don't know, but probably they would have increased it again. Especially since it is a European standard.

Nicholas Aquilina | MHSA: So, if they hadn't changed it, that shows that the system adopted is a good system.

Ian Padovani | ALLT: If there would have been a problem I'm sure that we would have heard of it by now.

Katrina Farrugia | Social Policy Commissioner: Then again something that we can look into is the type of technology that we have, in fact it was supposed to start August if I'm not mistaken. Now they postponed it because they did not have the right technology. So, we cannot compare ourselves with other countries, because probably their technology is much better than ours.

Ian Padovani | ALLT: I'm not sure if we have the technology that works in 9 days but for sure we have the other one that detects HIV after the 3rd month.

Jake Alex Gauci | MMSA: There is also like a take home test, and it can give you a conclusive answer after 2 weeks for sure.

Ian Padovani | ALLT: The government for sure can give these out for free, and maybe can be picked up from the blood donation service centre. The test says if you're infected or not in 15 days. The mainstay test is still the conventional one. I believe that this is a step in the right direction.

Nicholas Aquilina | MHSA: I'm afraid that these take home tests are not 100% accurate.

Jake Alex Gauci | MMSA: But even with conventional testing, after the 3 months, a year its just too much.

Ian Padovani | ALLT: Yes 3 months is acceptable.

Jake Alex Gauci | MMSA: Also, the 3 months should be for heterosexuals, it is more or less the same risk almost.

Adam McCarthy | JEF: I believe that 3 months is too short, you can still have inaccuracies. The better option is that the time frame will be consistent across the border, and I think that 6 months should do it. At the end of the day a small mistake, could result in a major consequence.

Daniel Grech | ASCS: Also, the blood bank, they are very cautious.

Katrina Farrugia | Social Policy Commissioner: Even if you've travelled in certain countries, you may not be allowed to donate blood.

Daniel Grech | ASCS: Of course, you can be susceptible of contracting certain diseases.



Katrina Farrugia | Social Policy Commissioner: So should we agree on a specific time frame now, or should I give you some time to discuss it with your organisations and come back to have a definite decision?

Collectively: We can, do it now.

Ben Cassar | JEF: 6 months would be good.

Katrina Farrugia | Social Policy Commissioner: So, about the reduction from a 12 month to a 6month period abstinence, all against.

Any abstentions

And the vote has passed 17.47

Katrina Farrugia | Social Policy Commissioner: Now we move on whether homosexuals are over screened, or if heterosexuals are under screened. Shall we take a vote on both of them at the same time?

Adam McCarthy | JEF: However, the screenings are the same, the difference is the time difference of abstinence, so in reality there is no over nor any underscreening of either homosexuals or heterosexuals.

Ben Cassar | JEF: The amount of abstinence should be for everyone. The way it is now it is that heterosexual partners can donate as long as they haven't had any new sexual partners in the past 6 months while homosexuals can only donate if they have been abstinent for 12 months and we can't to propose an amendment for them to both be 6 months. That's what we are saying.

Ian Padovani | ALLT: What we're saying is that ideally the restrictions are the same.

Katrina Farrugia | Social Policy Commissioner: So just to recap, an amendment for the reduction to 6 month of abstinence, however they can have sex if they have been with the same sexual partner for the duration of the last 6 months. So another vote can be taken on this;

All votes against.

Any abstentions.

And the Vote has passed 17.51

Katrina Farrugia | Social Policy Commissioner: As for the blood donation issue we have concluded, we hope to see you at Share the Vision and at Lejla Sajfija and I would also like to remind you of the table-a-motion option which we encourage you to use it so we can discuss topics which are related to your organization.

Meeting adjourned 18.02