

Critical choices about blood transfusions

For a time, blood transfusions may have been a lifeline for your child. They may not only have extended life but clearly added quality. You will have seen your child “perk up” and enjoy life. You will have seen colour and energy restored — for a while. You may have come to rely on this treatment as the one that can sustain. It may come as a terrible blow to have someone suggest that blood transfusions are perhaps no longer a wise choice of treatment. Giving up on blood transfusions may seem unnecessary. Why not go on giving these “pints of life”? This treatment seems to meet our goal of as much quality life as we can get?

Question: Why would I stop what restores her?

The answer may be in the question. “Restores” is a key word. Blood transfusions can be truly restorative. They can give the body a “boost” in the same way that a boosted battery gets a machine working again. Often the blood product gives the body time and energy to strengthen its own systems. But if the systems themselves are weakening, rather than strengthening, the question becomes is this sensible? If it cannot restore, if it sustains for only a very short time, should it take time out of the child’s life?

It may help you to think in terms of a battery. Boosting a battery that is wearing out is less and less effective. Each time, the charge holds for less time. It stops restoring. It becomes a frustration, not a value any longer.

Question: How do I know when we have reached that point?

You will need to discuss this with your doctor. She will be able to give you some guide to what benefits you might expect from another blood transfusion. This gives you a medical opinion. Then consider:

1. Do you and your child want to spend precious hours in a clinic setting at this stage?
2. How uncomfortable will this be?
3. How much peaceful time will be lost?
4. Is there some special event in the next few days that will truly add value to life’s end – a birthday, a visitor, a much wished for outing?

With this information you can then think about whether hours lost from comfort and peace are worth it.

This pamphlet is the result of a collaboration between British Columbia’s Children’s Hospital and Canuck Place Children’s Hospice

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