

# Blood donations halted from personnel deployed to Iraq

WASHINGTON — A parasitic disease being spread by sand flies in Iraq has prompted officials who oversee the military's blood supply to begin a one-year donor deferral for military personnel serving in that country.

The reason for the deferral is a form of the disease Leishmaniasis, which causes sores or lesions on the skin, and which in its most serious form can cause death.

Since 2002, military health officials have reported 22 cases of the disease, with the majority being reported in 2003.

"It's a cautious deferral; we're erring on the side of safety," said Lt. Col. **Ruth Sylvester**, director of the armed

by Tech. Sgt. Justin Pyle



**Air Force Reservist Tech. Sgt. Donna Harrison**, a medical technician with the U.S. Army Europe Blood Donor Center, assists Airman Amanda Tremblay in donating blood at the Ramstein Air Base, Germany, community center.

services blood program.

"People who actually get the disease are permanently deferred," she explained. "The issue with those who are exposed is that there is an incubation period before any symptoms appear — the deferral will prevent them from unknowingly donating blood."

According to her office, the parasite that causes the disease has been proven to survive in blood products stored under standard conditions for up to 25 days, and at least six cases of transfusion-transmitted cases of the disease have been reported.

Colonel Sylvester, who said she's not a physician but understands the dis-

ease, said there are two types of Leishmaniasis. The most common, and less serious, form is cutaneous Leishmaniasis, which causes lesions on the skin that may look like a volcano with a raised edge and center "crater" and may be covered with a scab, she said. "All of the military cases so far have been cutaneous," she added.

However, she said the more serious form of the disease — visceral Leishmaniasis — can affect the internal organs of the body, such as the spleen and liver, and can lead to death.

Colonel Sylvester said military people who have been infect-

ed with the disease are being treated at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, where doctors have set up a special treatment program for the disease.

Infected people undergo a three-week drug regimen that "will eliminate the disease and take care of the infection," she said.

"I don't believe there is cause for alarm," she emphasized. "We had 22 cases in the last two years with all the people we've had deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq and throughout the entire Central Command area. So it's a very small number, given the total number of people deployed."

But she did express concern about the disease's impact on the number of eligible military blood donors. The latest deferral is just one of many the military's blood program is now facing, she said.

In recent years, the program had to defer donors due to malaria risks around the world, and also had to defer people who might have been exposed to a variant of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease — better known as "Mad Cow" disease — or who lived in certain parts of Europe for specified time periods between 1980 and 1996.

"When we lose these donors, we have to bring in more donors," she said. "We have to find donors who have not traveled, not been deployed, and haven't lived in Europe. We're focusing our efforts on bringing those donors in."

She noted that the military has plenty of eligible donors to draw from, and she encouraged military and defense department personnel, as well as family members, to donate blood on a regular basis.

"In the DOD blood program, we only touch a very small percentage of the population that we draw from — about 20 percent of the eligible donors," she said. "So there are plenty of donors out there. The challenge is to get them in the door and to get them to donate."

— Army Sgt. 1st Class Doug Sample  
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