



# NO BLOOD, NO PROBLEM:

## Life-Saving Care Without the Need for Transfusions

by Erin Hoolahan

*Would you be willing to accept a blood transfusion if your life were at risk?  
The answer is not always 'yes.'*

At UPMC, every patient is treated with dignity and respect. When it comes to patients who refuse blood transfusions due to religious or personal beliefs, UPMC ensures their wishes are affirmed and cared for.

As a patient and their health care team work through eRecord's admission assessment, the question "Would you be willing to accept a blood transfusion if your life was at risk?" pops up. There are three possible answers: Yes; Not sure, I will discuss with my physician; and No.

If the answer is no, that does not mean the conversation ends there or the patient is out of options.

When a patient states they do not want blood or blood products, even if it would save their life, the system prompts another question: "Would you like a Patient Advocate from our Bloodless Medicine team to speak with you about your choices?"

### Why Not?

A UPMC patient and Jehovah's Witness, Terri King refuses blood transfusions because of her religious conviction.

Jehovah's Witnesses is a Christian, Bible-based organization founded in Pittsburgh by Charles Taze-Russell in 1872. Many patients in western Pennsylvania who refuse blood transfusions for faith-based reasons are Jehovah's Witnesses.

But they are not alone. Patients who are Rastafari, Muslim, or Brethren may also turn down blood transfusions on religious grounds.

Other UPMC patients refuse blood transfusions due to personal beliefs. These reasons can range from misunderstanding transfusions to being concerned that diseases or personality traits will be transferred through the transfusion.

Many of these patients previously had a negative experience or remember hearing about someone who had issues with a blood transfusion. All blood transfusions carry a risk, and past fears can amplify that concern for some patients. >>

“THE PRINCIPLES WE USE WHEN DEVELOPING BLOODLESS MEDICINE PROTOCOLS ARE REALLY APPLICABLE TO ALL PATIENTS, AND UPMC IS COMMITTED TO PROVIDING QUALITY CARE FOR PATIENTS, WHETHER THEY REFUSE OR SIMPLY PREFER NOT TO RECEIVE A BLOOD TRANSFUSION.”

— Mary Kay Wisniewski, director, Patient Blood Management

### Providing Options

Terri is a cancer survivor, but when she was diagnosed with a new mass on her kidney, fear rushed in with the diagnosis and realization of an inevitable surgery. Her local hospital has been known to give patients difficulty when seeking bloodless medicine options and does not offer bloodless surgeries. George Ghee, a member of the [Jehovah's Witnesses Hospital Liaison Committee](#), connected Terri with UPMC Bloodless Medicine services to schedule an appointment with a surgeon.

“Cancer does not wait,” Terri said. “The fact that UPMC makes this [bloodless medicine program](#) available impacts a patient's care immediately.”

A group of specialized UPMC employees play two primary roles in the bloodless medicine program. They are patient advocates who support and document a patient's wishes, and hospitalists who help physicians manage patient care. There is a hospitalist at almost every location across UPMC who is trained in bloodless medicine management and increasing hemoglobin levels without the need for a blood transfusion. Each of these avenues of bloodless medicine management can be utilized during patient care.

Once Terri connected with Bloodless Medicine Services, she was offered a consultation with **Deborah Tatro**, a UPMC bloodless medicine advocate. Deborah explained all the options involved in the pre-surgery choices Terri needed to make.

“A consultation involves discussing other modalities, called personal or conscience choices, that they would be willing to use as options instead of blood transfusions,” Deborah explained. “The medical team can use the advocate note when discussing and implementing those options as appropriate for each patient.”

### Advocating for the Patient

Understanding options is a vital piece of bloodless medical care for patients, particularly those who are one of Jehovah's Witnesses. While blood products and blood storage are not aligned with their beliefs, it is important that they are informed about autologous procedures, or procedures that use a patient's own blood.

Deborah has been a bloodless medicine advocate for 19 years, including seven at UPMC. She became a bloodless medicine advocate because she wanted to help people feel comfortable knowing their wishes would be understood, respected, and heard. She sees patients in some of their most stressful moments and is a calm, reassuring presence.

“By the end of the conversation patients are often overjoyed that I called,” Deborah said. “There is relief in their voice that something so important to them has been directly addressed, leaving one less thing to worry about before their procedure.”

For Terri, Deborah was like a sister when she needed one. Deborah's support and understanding helped Terri throughout her surgery process.

While advocates provide personal support to patients, they also ensure a patient's electronic health record is updated so patients receive proper medical care with respect to their decision to not receive blood transfusions. The electronic health record can then notify and remind caregivers of the patient's requests.

If a provider tries to order blood products for a bloodless medicine patient, an alert will pop up on the screen notifying the provider of the patient's decision. This ensures a patient's choices to not use blood products is communicated even when the patient is unable to speak for themselves.

### Minimizing the Need

In addition to the bloodless medicine program, UPMC works hard to prevent the need for blood transfusions in general. This is where the [Patient Blood Management](#) program comes into play.

“The blood transfusion is only the last component of this continuum of care,” **Jonathan Waters, MD**, Anesthesia, UPMC Magee-Womens Hospital, said. “If we focus on all of the components of patient blood management before we need a blood transfusion, then the transfusion becomes unnecessary.”

While blood management is important in any surgery, it's a vital component of bloodless medical care. Education may be one of the most important pieces of the blood management plan. Not only education about blood management techniques, but also about patients' reasoning and beliefs that led to them refusing blood transfusions.

“If the medical care team doesn't hold the same personal or religious beliefs as the patient, they need to understand them so they can maximize care,” **Christopher Hughes, MD**, adult liver transplant surgeon, said.

Maximizing bloodless medicine patients' care begins before a procedure ever happens. There is an extensive consent process to determine which blood products, for internal or topical use, a patient will or will not accept. A patient's blood counts can be tested, and steps can be taken to raise those blood counts as high as possible before surgery.

“It's the full spectrum of people who are involved in the bloodless medicine program that make UPMC such a special place for patients like this to come to for care,” Dr. Hughes said. “We're well versed in the reasons behind their decisions not to receive transfusions and that makes it all the better to be able to treat these patients.”

### Maximizing the Results

The [Living-Donor Liver Transplant](#) program is especially beneficial to patients seeking bloodless medicine care who often have low blood counts to begin with due to liver disease.

“One of the benefits of having a living donor is that we can schedule the transplant surgeries,” Dr. Hughes said. “Then we can prepare and have the hematologist start doing things to try to improve the patient's blood counts before going into surgery.”

Even if one patient seeking a liver transplant refuses blood transfusions, UPMC's priority is having the protocols in place to create the best possible outcome.

“The principles we use when developing bloodless medicine protocols are really applicable to all patients,” **Mary Kay Wisniewski**, director, Patient Blood Management, said. “UPMC is committed to providing quality care for patients, whether they refuse or simply prefer not to receive a blood transfusion.” **FF**

I hope to win this battle.

Trent, Respiratory Patient



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### How to Care for Bloodless Medicine Patients

- Call **1-877-675-7111** to request a bloodless medicine advocate consultation.
- Call the hospital operator and ask for the attending internist on duty to request a physician-to-physician bloodless medicine consultation.