

THE BLOOD BANK SERVICE

BY PHILIP MUSCAT, M.D., M.P.

Reading in the Times of Malta recently about the "Setting up of a Blood Bank" I told myself "at long last the Maltese Government is setting up its own Blood Bank". But to my astonishment I found that not only was this going to be set up and run by voluntary bodies, but that the Government has nothing to do with its establishment.

To tell the truth, what I expected to read was then at least that the "Sovereign Military Order of Malta", Mr. Calleja and the Cathedral Chapter were going to help the Government in setting up its own long promised Blood Bank.

INITIATIVE

Without trying to lessen the merits of the above voluntary bodies in showing initiative to set up their own Blood Bank within six months, I want to make some comments both as a doctor and as a Member of Parliament in order to rally public opinion on what I consider to be a national, humanitarian service.

I do not want to stress too much the fact that this essential medical service should have been established years ago. On the other hand I cannot over-emphasize the principle that this should be the sacrosanct responsibility and initiative of the Government.

Lethargy and a false sense of medical security were shown by the last two Ministers of Health. Hence the complacency and any lack of concrete results in establishing a Government Blood Bank to date. This has been underlined by the fact that others have felt the urgent need to do what the Government should have already established.

A Parliamentary commission was therefore set up three years ago — with the Minister of Health as chairman — with a view to finding out the difficulties involved in blood transfusion and the installation of a Blood Bank at St. Luke's Hospital. At that time it was alleged that certain people had to pay up to £5 to get blood when it was necessary.

Health rather belatedly announced in Parliament that he was also installing a Blood Bank at St. Luke's Hospital. This, the Minister did soon after the voluntary bodies referred to above had seized the bull by its horns and announced their intention.

We are now being faced with the extravagant and simultaneous installation of two Blood Banks, both being run independently of each other. This duplication of efforts in a small country like ours we can ill afford. It is unfortunate and creates a number of problems, amongst which one may point out these:— maintenance alone will amount to about £5,000 a year — not counting of course the use of an ambulance for door to door collection; these two organizations will inevitably have to compete with one another for getting blood donor volunteers — which are already limited indeed; there is bound to be blood wastage since blood may be stored only for three weeks.

WASTAGE

Any blood stored in a fridge must be thrown away. This wastage will therefore be double, and why do we maintain a Blood Bank in St. Ursula Street, Valletta? It ought to be as near as possible to the institution where it is mostly dispensed, especially in emergency cases. Finally, we are very short of blood transfusion Medical Officers especially if they have to be full timers and efficient.

To sum up, I make the following suggestions. — There should be only one Blood Bank and this must be run by the Government. If another Blood Bank is needed this should be in Gozo.

It ought to be quartered in St. Luke's Hospital. It must be run by a full time, efficient,

well paid and trained medical staff, etc., twenty-four hours a day. A well equipped ambulance should be used to collect blood from door to door. It must be sustained and backed financially and with propaganda by all voluntary bodies and individuals such as the Church, the Military Order of Malta, etc.

This will give us an efficient, useful and well organized Blood Bank and blood collection which are of equal importance. We should not waste precious money and blood.

Dr. V. Moran asked in Parliament:

Is it the intention of the Medical and Health Department to set up a Governmental Blood Bank? If in the affirmative, when, tentatively is the Blood Bank beginning to operate? What relations are there going to be between the Government Blood Bank and that intended to be set up by the Order of St. John and maintained by the Cathedral Chapter?

The Minister of Health, in replying to the first part of the question, referred to the reply he had given on January 22, 1968, wherein he had stated that the equipment for the Blood Bank had already reached Malta and had already been installed at St. Luke's Hospital. It was added in the reply that it must be appreciated that the equipment alone is not enough to constitute a Blood Bank which also needs the generous support of the public in the donation of blood in order that it provides good service and be run efficiently.

The Minister of Health stated that there was no doubt whatever if a private organization carries on similar work and in fact such initiative is not to be discouraged.

Regarding the second part of the question, the Minister of Health stated that he would be in a position to give a reply when the Blood Bank to be run by the Order of St. John starts functioning.