

**The Honorable Patty Hajdu, PC, MP**  
Minister of Health of Canada  
c/o Sabina Saini, Chief of Staff  
sabina.saini@canada.ca

11 May 2021

**re: Canadian Blood Services lack of accountability in addressing Anti-Black homophobia in blood donation in Canada.**

I am writing to request that the Honorable Patty Hadju coordinate with Health Canada, and the provincial and territorial ministers of health to intervene and address, in my expert opinion, the egregious systemic anti-Black racism/anti-Black homophobia of the blood agency. COVID-19 has taught us many lessons regarding health protocols and practices, including that **now is the time** to address, confront and account for anti-Black racism and systemic (anti-Black) racism in our health institutions and practices.

My name is **Dr. OmiSoore Dryden**. I am the [James R. Johnston Chair](#) in Black Canadian Studies in the Faculty of Medicine, and an associate professor in the Department of Community Health & Epidemiology at Dalhousie University. A Black queer lesbian, I am a leading scholar in critical race theory and Black Queer Diasporic analytics (in blood donation) in Canada. I am also the principal investigator of the large research project, *"ACB and MSM – it's not an oxymoron: A research project that explores the importance of ACB people in MSM blood donation,"* ([#GotBlood2Give / #DuSangADonner](#)); funded by MSM Research Grant Program of Canadian Blood Services (CBS). The central tenet in my research is that Black LGBTQI+ people in Canada experience intersecting forms of stigma, harassment and discrimination. For nearly 20 years, I have been working to have CBS acknowledge the intersecting realities of Black men who have sex with men when it comes to donor questionnaire and protocols, and thus creating a more equitable blood agency.

On **Thursday April 29, 2021**, CBS, a charitable organization who in the fiscal year 2020 received close to \$1.2 billion in federal, provincial, and territorial support, hosted a meeting with key stakeholders (including researchers and community members) to "share [our] thoughts on what should be included in a public acknowledgment" regarding the "significant pain and hurt to members of the LGBTQ+ community". On November 27, 2020 CBS issued a public statement *"asking Canadians to hold us accountable,"* yet omitting any mention of anti-Black racism. They added: "We know some of our screening practices cause pain to some who seek to give" (emphasis added)." As an organization, CBS stated in advance of the meeting that they wanted "to publicly acknowledge [the] hurt, and work with the community to repair relationships and set a new course for the future." As the only visibly Black stakeholder in this meeting, I repeated my concerns about systemic anti-Black homophobia from the donor questionnaire (Appendix A) to within the agency (staff and structure). So, you can imagine my shock, surprise and outrage when in front of the 15 invited attendees, **CBS staff member, Don Lapierre, Program Manager of the Plasma Research Program exclaimed that he was shocked that I was "still spewing this garbage" and that I was being libelous.**

This is not the first time that CBS staff members, Don Lapierre and Dr. Mindy Goldman in particular, have been dismissive, derisive, insulting; and displaying a lack of professionalism. On **Friday August 21, 2015** the then Executive Director of the Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention (Black CAP), Shannon Ryan, the Executive Director of the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) Debbie Douglas, and myself met with Don Lapierre and Dr. Goldman identifying the issues of the racially stigmatizing donor questionnaire used by CBS (written and visual depictions, Appendix A). In this very *first meeting* with CBS staff, Don Lapierre and Dr. Goldman's response to our thoroughly researched, important and serious concerns was not sober consideration, or thoughtful engagement; instead, it was loud and dismissive laughter. The CBS staff suggested that it was impossible to address both racism and homophobia simultaneously, "that it was best to narrow the focus and only focus on one group" and

eventually CBS would address the concerns of others. As is well known, this type of 'one issue at a time' logics negatively impacts people with intersecting experiences, like Black men who have sex with men, and ultimately furthers the tenets of systemic racism and anti-Black homophobia.

On **Monday December 11, 2017**, the MSM Research Knowledge Exchange Webinar, I was informed that the questions in Appendix A would be removed from the donor questionnaire. However, no statement would be made addressing the racially stigmatizing questions nor the harm these questions caused. The questions in Appendix A were in effect for **almost 20 years**. Removing the questions without public acknowledgement or accountability of the anti-Black racism became a practice of avoidance and a form of white-washing. And remained an issue in need of attention.

On **Monday December 10, 2018**, the MSM Research Knowledge Exchange Webinar met again. In this meeting I continued to discuss the impacts of anti-Black homophobia with blood donation. Removing the images and questions were important, but without accountability, the harm lingers and grows. And again, my thoroughly researched and important intervention was met with laughter. ***That laughter lingered without any direct or immediate intervention by CBS staff.*** And as we know, silence operates as permission; inaction is complicity.

Even with these previous experiences and practices, what occurred on **April 29, 2021 was the first time I felt** the racially abusive and aggressive behaviour became threatening. I have never witnessed any other (predominately white, gay, male) researchers treated in this manner. To be clear, this is not simply racially abusive and aggressive behaviour. It intersects with my queer femme gender – thus it is racially abusive lesbophobic/femme-phobic aggression.

I wish I could say that colleagues of Don Lapierre intervened on my behalf, but while I was protesting his characterizing the issues of anti-Black homophobia as 'spewing garbage, and libelous' one of his colleagues muted my mic. To the best of my knowledge, as a Black queer femme lesbian attending the meeting, I was the *only Black person present*, and the only person at that time speaking about anti-Black racism and anti-Black homophobia. In response to his colleague muting my mic, Don Lapierre laughed and said "good, mute her." I unmuted my mic to once again outline how his behaviour was unprofessional and abusive, only to have my mic muted a second time. I unmuted my mic a final time to remind people that the person being unprofessional and abusive on the call was Lapierre, and as the only Black person on the call, to be silenced while speaking about anti-Black racism and anti-Black homophobia is, in fact, a racist act. At this point, a colleague of Lapierre, Ellis Westwood, Director Stakeholder Engagement, Public Affairs thanked me for raising the issue of intersectionality, but then proceeded to both minimize and belittle my contributions by claiming that Canadian Blood Services could not be accountable to "all the racism in history or the racism in society."

Such common "moves to whiteness" are precisely the harmful, racist actions that Robin Di'Angelo details in her text *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, where she states, "the simplistic idea that racism is limited to individual intentional acts committed by unkind people is at the root of virtually all white defensiveness on this topic." No one is asking CBS to be responsible for all of racism in history and society. Rather, what I and others have been demanding is that CBS, and their staff, be accountable to the systemic (anti-Black) racism within the agency and within blood safety protocols. This accountability must also occupy a public space or public meetings, such as the one held on April 29. As I stated, for nearly 20 years, I have been raising the issue of anti-Black racism and anti-Black homophobia in Canadian Blood Services and have spoken, at length, for the need to acknowledge the systemic anti-Black (homophobic) racism within organizational practices, and in the science upon which they claim to be bound.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See O.H. Dryden. It's in us to give: Black Life and the Racial Profiling of Blood Donation. In R. Diverlus & S. M. Ware for Black Lives Matter-Toronto (Eds.), *Black Lives Matter Canada: A Blueprint for Black Liberation*. 211-224; "'A Queer Too Far': Blackness, Gay Blood and Transgressive Possibilities." In *Disrupting Queer Inclusion: Canadian Homonationalisms and the Politics of Belonging* (UBC Press) 116-132; "Canadians Denied: A Queer Diasporic Analysis of the Canadian blood donor." *Atlantis: A Women's Studies Journal*. Spring 2010;

Due to the racially abusive and aggressive behaviour of CBS staff and the support he received from his colleagues through muting my mic and misrepresenting my expert assessment of the proposed statement, the meeting became an unsafe and hostile environment. I felt his statement that I was being libelous for speaking out on anti-Black racism to be threatening. Thus, I, the **only** Black scholar/researcher in North America, whose scholarship and research focuses on anti-Black racism and homophobia in blood donation in Canada, was forced to leave the meeting. I immediately sent an email to Chris Brennan, Manager, Stakeholder Relations, who convened the stakeholder meeting – in that email, I documented my shock, dismay, and anger over the treatment I endured and stated I expected the matter to be addressed and that CEO Dr. Graham Sher would contact me directly, within the week, no later than May 6, 2021.

On May 7, 2021 I received an email from Ellis Westwood, that neither offered a time for when Dr. Graham Sher would contact me directly, nor information on what steps would be taken to address Don Lapierre's egregious actions. Therefore, I am left to believe that CBS, under the leadership of Dr. Graham Sher, is either unwilling or incapable of demonstrating accountability for systemic anti-Black (homophobic) racism within the blood agency.

In light of the federal government's historic [Call to Action](#) and acknowledgment by Prime Minister Trudeau that "systemic racism exists in all institutions," I must insist that the federal, provincial and territorial ministers of health and Health Canada intervene in this matter immediately, and address what CBS seems unwilling and incapable of doing. The aggressive behaviour of CBS staff members at the April 29 meeting, previous hostility by CBS staff members (as I outline above), and the systemic anti-Black (homophobic) racism of the agency can no longer be overlooked or disregarded.

In order to practice anti-racism, one needs to begin with three steps: (1) name racism, specifically systemic racism, and anti-Black homophobia in the agency and donor protocols; (2) ask how racism and specifically systemic racism and anti-Black homophobia is operating within the agency, and operationalized by staff, and; (3) organize, strategize, and commit to disrupting that racism and putting into place an anti-racism practice, including holding people accountable for their racially abusive and aggressive behaviour.

As stated in CBS annual report, 2019-2020, "Under bylaws governed by the Canada Not-for-profit Corporations Act, the provincial and territorial ministers of health (except Quebec's minister) serve as corporate members of Canadian Blood Services and appoint our board of directors. The ministers also collectively approve Canadian Blood Services' three-year corporate plan and annual budget." ([p66](#)) Therefore, I am **specifically requesting** the following

1. that the Honorable Patty Hadju, along with Health Canada, and the provincial and territorial ministers of health convene as soon as possible to address this serious issue of anti-Black racism in the blood agency
2. That the CBS board of directors hold their staff accountable for this racially abusive-lesbophobic/femme-phobic aggressive behaviour
3. And that CBS take public accountability for the systemic anti-Black racism and anti-Black homophobia in blood donation and in the agency.

Sincerely,



Dr. OmiSoore H. Dryden  
James R. Johnston Chair, Black Canadian Studies, Faculty of Medicine  
Associate Professor, Department of Community Health & Epidemiology  
P.I. #GotBlood2Give / #DuSangADonner

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CC

### **Federal Government and Health Canada**

Kathryn Nowers, Director of Policy ([kathryn.nowers@canada.ca](mailto:kathryn.nowers@canada.ca))  
Lhori Webster, Policy Advisor ([lhori.webster@canada.ca](mailto:lhori.webster@canada.ca))  
Andy Fillmore, MP ([andy.fillmore@parl.gc.ca](mailto:andy.fillmore@parl.gc.ca))  
Dr. Wanda Thomas-Bernard, Senator ([wandathomas.bernard@sen.parl.gc.ca](mailto:wandathomas.bernard@sen.parl.gc.ca))

### **Provincial and Territorial Ministers (and deputy ministers) of Health**

Adrian Dix ([HLTH.Minister@gov.bc.ca](mailto:HLTH.Minister@gov.bc.ca))  
Stephen Brown ([hlth.dmooffice@gov.bc.ca](mailto:hlth.dmooffice@gov.bc.ca))  
Tyler Shandro ([health.minister@gov.ab.ca](mailto:health.minister@gov.ab.ca))  
Lorna Rosen ([lorna.rosen@gov.ab.ca](mailto:lorna.rosen@gov.ab.ca))  
Paul Merriman ([he.minister@gov.sk.ca](mailto:he.minister@gov.sk.ca))  
Max Hendricks ([max.hendricks@health.gov.sk.ca](mailto:max.hendricks@health.gov.sk.ca))  
Heather Stefanson ([minhsc@leg.gov.mb.ca](mailto:minhsc@leg.gov.mb.ca))  
Karen Herd ([dmhsc@leg.gov.mb.ca](mailto:dmhsc@leg.gov.mb.ca))  
Christine Elliott ([christine.elliott@pc.ola.org](mailto:christine.elliott@pc.ola.org))  
Helen Angus ([helen.angus@ontario.ca](mailto:helen.angus@ontario.ca))  
Dorothy Shephard ([dorothy.shephard@gnb.ca](mailto:dorothy.shephard@gnb.ca))  
Gérald Richard ([gerald.richard@gnb.ca](mailto:gerald.richard@gnb.ca))  
Ernie Hudson ([ehudsonminister@gov.pe.ca](mailto:ehudsonminister@gov.pe.ca))  
Mark Spidel ([maspidel@gov.pe.ca](mailto:maspidel@gov.pe.ca))  
Zach Churchill ([health.minister@novascotia.ca](mailto:health.minister@novascotia.ca))  
John Haggie ([hcsminister@gov.nl.ca](mailto:hcsminister@gov.nl.ca))  
Tracy-Anne McPhee ([tracy.mcphee@yukon.ca](mailto:tracy.mcphee@yukon.ca))  
Stephen Samis ([stephen.samis@yukon.ca](mailto:stephen.samis@yukon.ca))  
Julie Green ([julie\\_green@gov.nt.ca](mailto:julie_green@gov.nt.ca))  
Bruce Cooper ([bruce\\_cooper@gov.nt.ca](mailto:bruce_cooper@gov.nt.ca))  
Lorne Kusugak ([lkusugak@gov.nu.ca](mailto:lkusugak@gov.nu.ca))  
Ruby Brown ([rbrown@gov.nu.ca](mailto:rbrown@gov.nu.ca))



### **Ontario Black Caucus**

Jill Andrew ([jandrew-CO@ndp.on.ca](mailto:jandrew-CO@ndp.on.ca))  
Kevin Yarde ([kyarde-CO@ndp.on.ca](mailto:kyarde-CO@ndp.on.ca))  
Laura Mae Lindo ([llindo-co@ndp.on.ca](mailto:llindo-co@ndp.on.ca))  
Rima Berns-McGown ([rberns-mcgonwn-CO@ndp.on.ca](mailto:rberns-mcgonwn-CO@ndp.on.ca))  
Faisal Hassan ([fhassan-CO@ndp.on.ca](mailto:fhassan-CO@ndp.on.ca))

### **Canadian Blood Services Board of Governors**

Mel Cappe ([mel.cappe@utoronto.ca](mailto:mel.cappe@utoronto.ca))  
Glenda Yeates ([glenda.yeates@hc-sc.gc.ca](mailto:glenda.yeates@hc-sc.gc.ca))  
Dr. Jeff Scott ([jeffrey.scott@iwk.nshealth.ca](mailto:jeffrey.scott@iwk.nshealth.ca))  
Dr. Brian Postl ([brian.postl@umanitoba.ca](mailto:brian.postl@umanitoba.ca))  
Bob Adkins ([rjma@tdslaw.com](mailto:rjma@tdslaw.com) / [jackie@tdslaw.com](mailto:jackie@tdslaw.com))  
Kelly Butt ([kbuttconsulting@rogers.com](mailto:kbuttconsulting@rogers.com))  
Victor Young ([viclyoung@hotmail.com](mailto:viclyoung@hotmail.com))  
David Lehberg ([davidl@k-cap.com](mailto:davidl@k-cap.com))

## Appendix A: Summary of the experience for Black/Africa MSM with blood donation at Canadian Blood Services

| MSM / Gay Blood ban/deferral   | Black/African ban/deferral  |
|--|---|
| <p><b>1998-2013:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Male donors: Have you had sex with a man, even one time since 1977?</li> </ul>         | <p><b>1998-2005</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Were you born in or have you lived in any of the countries listed here since 1977: Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Niger, Nigeria?</li> <li>Have you had sexual contact with a male, even one time since 1977, who was from Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Niger, Nigeria?</li> <li>When traveling to any of the above countries since 1977, have you received blood or treatment with a product made from blood?</li> </ul>  |
|  | <p><b>2005-2013</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Were you born in or have you lived in Africa since 1977?</li> <li>Since 1977, did you receive a blood transfusion or blood product in Africa?</li> <li>Have you had sexual contact with anyone who was born in or lived in Africa since 1977?</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>2013-2016</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Male donors: In the last five years, have you had sex with a man, even once?</li> </ul> | <p><b>2013-2015</b></p> <div> <p>Since 1977, were you born in or have you lived in Africa?</p>  <p>Yes No</p> </div> <div> <p>LIFESTYLE QUESTION:</p> <p>Have you had sexual contact with anyone who was born in or lived in Africa since 1977?</p> <p>Yes No</p> <p>Back Skip Next Replay</p> </div> <div> <p>TRAVEL QUESTION:</p> <p>Since 1977, did you receive a blood transfusion or blood product in Africa?</p>  <p>Yes No</p> </div> |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Were you born in or have you lived in Africa since 1977?</li> <li>Since 1977, did you receive a blood transfusion or blood product in Africa?</li> <li>Have you had sexual contact with anyone who was born in or lived in Africa since 1977?</li> </ul>   |

At this time, Canadian Blood Services argued that this type of “geographic deferral” was necessary since people who lived in Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Niger, Nigeria may have been exposed to a then new strain of the virus, HIV-I, Group O – a strain, which at the time, could not be reliably detected through blood testing. As such, anyone from these countries would not be eligible to donate blood. CBS also stated, “this is not based on race or ethnicity but possible exposure to HIV-I Group O” (CBS, n.b.d.). However, there were a number of ways in which this statement was contravened:

1. HIV-I Group O was also present in predominately white countries, France, Belgium, Spain, Germany and the United States (Behring-Diagnostics, Aug 1997). However, these countries were *not* added to the lists of concern. If this was really about preventing another tainted blood scandal, then all countries where HIV-I Group O was present would have been included in this deferral.
2. Dr. Mindy Goldman stated that moving from 8 countries in Africa to the entire continent of Africa was for questionnaire simplicity. It was easier to answer this one question Goldman stated, then be expected to answer yes or no to each country. Science did not and does not support the stereotype that HIV is rampant throughout Africa (this is a racially framed stereotype). Thus, HIV-I, Group O is not rampant throughout all 56 countries in Africa.
3. However, people from Africa, but not the 8 specifically named countries, were unnecessarily barred from donating blood. In addition, some white people recounted to me that although they were born in one of the 8 African countries, they were still allowed to donate blood.
4. An approved and effective blood test for HIV-I Group O was approved for use in 2009 however, these questions remained on the donor questionnaire until 2015.
5. The images used in these questions trade on the racist tropes of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* which suggests that Africa is barren of technology, or housing structures and its inhabitants live in close proximity with animals and vegetation.

**The totality of these decisions made this deferral about race and not simply about geography.**

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>2016-2018:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Male donors: In the last 12 months have you had sex with another man?</li> </ul> | <b>2015-2016</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Since 1977 were you born in or have you lived in Togo and Cameroon?</li> <li>Have you had sexual contact with anyone who was born in or lived in Togo and Cameroon since 1877?</li> </ul> <p>* Images used for these questions are a version of the acacia tree (middle image above)</p> |
|   | <b>2016-2018 (April 23)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In the last 12 months have you lived in or visited Togo and Cameroon?</li> <li>In the last 12 months have you had sexual contact with anyone who was lived in or visited Togo and Cameroon?</li> </ul>  |
| <b>2018-present</b><br>Male donors: in the last 3 months have you had sex with another man?   |  |

6. Asked why Togo and Cameroon were now the focus, Dr. Mindy Goldman stated that if there was a new strain of HIV, there would need to be time to develop an appropriate test, the assumption being that new strains of HIV could only come from Africa. As COVID-19 has demonstrated new variants of viruses can come from anywhere in the world. In addition, where new variants are first detected is not the same as where they first originated.

**As I stated in my letter, removing the questions without public acknowledgement or accountability of the systemic anti-Black racism remains a practice of avoidance and a form of white-washing – an issue still in need of attention.**