



The Threats to the Already Critical Levels of Veterinary Blood Supplies

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The supply of veterinary animal blood and blood products is a vital but extremely fragile lifeline for millions of pets.

Unfortunately, as most veterinarians can attest, the availability of these supplies is chronically short throughout the United States (and abroad).¹⁻³

Many pet owners have no idea this crisis exists until their pet is in dire need. While there are no officially documented stories of veterinarians having to ration blood or deny care to some animals so blood can be used on others in more urgent need (yet), almost any emergency care veterinarian can speak anecdotally about such rationing and difficult healthcare decisions they must make every day.

Recently, at the 2025 International Veterinary Emergency & Critical Care Symposium, there were entire sessions dedicated to this topic, including one titled, “The Haves and Have Nots: The Ethics of Limited Resource Allocation in Veterinary Medicine.”⁴ That session was followed by a full panel discussion, “Blood as a Limited Resource—Case-Based Panel Discussion,”⁵ where panel members outlined how they made critical decisions on how to treat patients based on how to most effectively use their limited resources rather than on best practices. As you can see (and likely already know firsthand), the shortage of animal blood for transfusion is a very real and critical issue.

Compounding this issue are significant threats to the future availability of animal blood supplies, which are discussed below. Each of these threats, taken alone, is a challenge to overcome; in total, they threaten to devastate the whole industry of supply. They are persistent, and they continue to grow. Without more education and directed advocacy from the veterinary community, the shortage may soon become insurmountable. No provider wants to have to tell a family their pet might have been saved, but they needed blood, and there just wasn't enough.

Threat 1: Increasing Demand

Pet ownership in the United States has increased significantly over the past 3 decades, with 66% of households (86.9 million) owning a pet at the end of 2024.⁶ Today, more Americans own pets than ever before: 89 million dogs and 73 million cats, in addition to millions more rabbits, reptiles, amphibians, fish, and birds.⁷ In total, it's roughly 1 pet for every 2 people living in the United States. Globally, pet ownership is rising annually,⁸ and there's no indication it will slow down.

With increased population comes increased need for health care, and veterinary blood supplies—including plasma, red blood cells, whole blood, and platelets—are no exception. While there are no national figures on the number of veterinary blood transfusions each year, some “back of the envelope” math does illustrate the need. Specifically, there were 55,965 “veterinary services businesses” in the United States in 2024.⁹ One of these, the UC Davis Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital, provides more than 600 transfusions each year.¹⁰ Assuming the average veterinary office does 10% of that volume, or 60 transfusions, that generates an estimate of more than 3.4 million transfusions annually across the country. That's a very rough estimate, but the fact remains that millions of dogs, cats, and other pets likely need transfusions every year.

Importantly, we know the overall demand comes from more than traumatic accidents or pets eating something they shouldn't have. Animals that have various autoimmune diseases, liver disease, or clotting or other disorders need regular blood transfusions to preserve their health, and pet owners are demanding these kinds of specialized services more often.¹ At the same time, researchers and universities need blood

supplies to advance veterinary medicine and investigate new treatments.

Threat 2: Lack of Donors

Originally, the animal blood supply was dependent on veterinarians providing blood from their own pets in their offices. Today, however, the supply is more likely to come from veterinary blood banks. These banks can be grouped into 2 categories: community blood banks and colony blood banks.

Community blood banks are those where pet owners voluntarily bring their pets to donate blood on a regular basis. It is a good idea that can help increase the available blood supply; however, it's been slow to take off. Few pet owners have the time, ability, or inclination to bring their pet in for a blood donation every several weeks, which makes the contribution from community blood banks limited, unstable, and unpredictable. Additionally, extra time and expenses are involved in screening the blood donations to ensure they're safe. Even so, these programs rely strictly on external donors, so while clinics may have their own standardized processes and procedures in place to screen donors and blood products, they must largely rely on an honor system to ensure their donors are properly cared for and remain free of disease.

The upshot is that while community blood banks are a thoughtful approach that the industry hopes will grow as more pet owners support the concept, there are very few viable community blood banks in the country selling product for widespread use. In California, for example, which has some of the most aggressive policies to promote community blood banking, these banks collectively provide less than 3% of the veterinary blood or blood products used annually.¹¹

Colony blood banks, on the other hand, supply the vast majority of veterinary blood supplies. These are facilities where dogs and cats are housed in “colonies,” where they are fed, regularly monitored for their health, released for play, in the presence of other animals or people for socialization, and under the constant care of a licensed oversight veterinarian. They have strict disease screening, health parameters, and predonation protocols to control the quality of products produced, and facilities are monitored and inspected by the USDA and its state counterparts to

ensure compliance with the Animal Welfare Act, as well as state and/or local requirements.

Although colony blood banks have been found to provide more than 95% of the total volume of animal blood in California (and presumably as much or more in other parts of the country based on California's role as a leader in this space), blood colonies are decreasing in number.¹² In just the past year, Hemopet, one of the larger colony blood banks in California, closed its doors for undisclosed reasons, reducing the total volume of blood supplies in the state by 20% between the first and second quarters.¹³

Similarly, in the past, colony blood banks would take in animals from shelters that would otherwise have been euthanized. This option, however, is no longer available, and efforts to open new colony blood banks to increase the available supplies are often met with resistance.

Threat 3: Blood Can Only Be Stored for a Limited Time

Veterinary blood transfusions date back to 1665, when British doctor Richard Lower conducted the first “dog-to-dog” transfusions.¹⁴ After that, however, not much changed until 1914, when Adolf Hustin discovered that adding sodium citrate to blood prevented it from clotting and allowed it to be stored safely for several days.¹⁴

That gave rise to the concept of blood banking, but even today, these products can only be stored for about 30 days. Limited shelf life combined with the lack of donors puts veterinarians and pet hospitals on a perpetual treadmill.

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RESOURCE 1

Scan the QR code to read an article from *Today's Veterinary Nurse* outlining considerations for creating a small animal blood bank.

Threat 4: Well-Intended Animal Activism

The biggest threat to the blood supply comes from activists who argue that “animals are not ours” and subsequently advocate for the closure of blood banks. They argue colony banks are inhumane because the animals live on site in closed habitats and their blood is drawn at regular intervals. However, at the same time, these animals receive on-site veterinary care and protection/oversight from the government authorities listed previously.

Sometimes these efforts are limited to the policy arena, calling for investigations of questionable merit,¹¹ or simply putting pressure on veterinarians. In other cases, some activists have shown they're willing to be much more aggressive and even dangerous.^{15,16}

Tactics aside, however, these efforts threaten the supply of veterinary blood products and, consequently, the health of pets in need of lifesaving transfusions. In essence, these activists, while well-intended, are undermining the welfare of animals who are in need of blood products, hindering efforts to save lives, and even threatening the lives of the very animals they seek to protect.

A Call to Action for the Veterinary Community

There has been minimal discourse in the veterinary community on the issue of blood banks and educating pet owners on their importance. There are notable exceptions. Some clinics, for example, are implementing robust public education programs to encourage more volunteer blood donations. Others are creating their own internal volunteer-based blood banks to help produce their own supply (**RESOURCE 1**). The California Veterinary Medical Association also opposed legislation to eliminate colony blood banks until it was amended to ensure this option would be

available until community blood banks could provide a reliable, safe, and regular supply of blood to meet demand.

Ultimately, it's a simple question of saving animals' lives and keeping families united with their beloved pets for as long as humanely possible. This is only going to get more difficult if blood supplies become even more scarce. Pet owners trust their veterinarians; they look to them as a credible, expert voice. It's time for veterinarians to use their platform to take on the blood supply shortage, educate pet owners on the facts about community and colony blood banking, and help to overcome the threats that, left unchecked, will make the blood shortage worse. **TVP**

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Disclosure

Bill Romanelli has consulted for Animal Blood Resources International (ABRI). The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy of the NAVC or *Today's Veterinary Practice*.

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Bill was born in Fort Worth, Texas, and since then has lived just about everywhere, from Narragansett, Rhode Island, to Cairo, Egypt. By day he is a public affairs consultant; by night he is a freelance writer, has authored 4 books, and thinks Thoreau was right to "live deep and suck out all the marrow of life." He has touched the Great Pyramids, swum the Great Barrier Reef, gazed upon the Mona Lisa, hooked a blue marlin, walked the Arctic tundra, learned the power of prayer, and seen beauty in the world more breathtaking than anything he imagined. He thought he knew what love was until his children were born and started his greatest adventure of all. He has written numerous articles, feature stories, and commentaries that have appeared in such publications as *The Los Angeles Times*, *Swimming World*, *Game & Fish*, *The Sacramento Bee*, *Cycle California*, *Light and Life Magazine*, and others. His latest books include *After the Fall* and *Unleashing My Inner Geek*, he is hopelessly addicted to Dunkin' Donuts and vanilla chai lattes, and he currently lives in Sacramento, California, with his wife Janet.