



Blood and Honour

Tara, a worker in central Asia, writes about giving blood to save a 'dishonoured' life

Working in a rural hospital in central Asia where there is no electricity or even running water means that we have no means of storing blood, so we, the workers, become the walking blood bank. That means that we have a list of our staff's blood groups. When a patient needs blood, we can call that person, take their blood and bring it directly to the patient. Since I am O negative, a universal donor, I often give blood in emergency situations where there isn't time to do proper testing on compatibility. Of course, this often means that I am called up to the hospital in the middle of the night to give blood.

However, the last time I gave blood to someone, it was a little different. We had an unwed pregnant woman come in (yes, it does happen). She had been trying to get rid of the pregnancy. This may seem drastic to us, but in a culture where it is about shame and honour and not about right and wrong, it makes a little more sense. An action is not judged on whether it is right or wrong, but on whether it will bring honour or shame to the family. After many tries, this scared girl finally succeeded in killing the unborn baby, but it also caused lots of bleeding. Her family did finally bring her in to see us, which

is a big step in this part of the world because now her 'shame' is known. We were able to treat and stop the bleeding, but she had lost around 2 litres of blood through the ordeal and needed a blood transfusion. Whenever possible, we try to get the family to donate the blood, sometimes with a serious talk about how safe this is, and how their body will replenish the blood loss so they won't be 'weak' forever. Giving blood is a new concept around here. In this case, the family flatly refused to give blood to save the life of their daughter. In the end, another foreigner and I gave her the blood she so desperately needed to live. She did get better and we were able to discharge her, but now her fate is in the hands of her family – will they forgive her (not a usual response in this country), will they reject her, or will they kill her to cancel their shame and restore their honour? I may never find this out, but this did lead to conversations with our local workers who didn't understand why we would give blood to a 'bad' girl. Breaking cultural beliefs is often a good time to introduce new and different ideas and beliefs. I know what we did will have an impact on those around us as we showed our acceptance of her by giving of our blood to save her 'dishonoured' life.