June 14 is the day chosen by the World Health Organization (WHO) to observe World Blood Donor Day. On this day we honour those who regularly give blood, most often voluntarily and without remuneration, in order to save the lives of others, usually strangers. According to 2008 figures, 62 countries reported collecting 100% of their blood supplies from voluntary, unpaid donors.

The theme for World Blood Donor Day 2011 is "More blood. More life." This theme reinforces the urgent need for more people all over the world to become life-savers by volunteering to donate blood regularly. It is vital that blood banks keep reserves of whole blood of each type to deal with disasters, emergencies and accidents. It is also important to retain a supply of blood-derived products such as red blood cells, plasma or platelets.

Throughout the world, the aim of national and international regulatory authorities and transfusion services is to ensure that only those products of demonstrated quality, safety and efficacy are used. Many countries, however, still have significant difficulties in achieving this aim. This is particularly the case in developing countries, where, while there is a constant requirement for blood products, there may be limited funding for quality control. WHO provides technical guidance and quality assurance tools to regulatory authorities, national control laboratories and manufacturers to support the implementation of quality and safety systems for the production and control of blood products worldwide.

In this issue of EMHJ, a report from the Islamic Republic of Iran highlights a related social predicament. When litigation ensues following transfusion-related virus infection, for example HIV or hepatitis C virus, not only the recipients of the contaminated blood product suffer: the consequences can indirectly affect the whole population. According to the circumstances described in this report, the decision of the court resulted in disproportionate amounts of the health budget (to cover compensation and treatment costs) being diverted to a small proportion of the population; consequently, other sectors of the health care service were left in deficit. This is a dilemma national health services have to take into account.

It is also a compelling argument for maintaining an effective quality control system in the blood transfusion service.