

## Expert suggests decisions to close blood programs are linked to economics

By Henry Schwan

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Some blood donors who spoke to the Daily News are concerned about recent bank closures, including next month's closure of the blood donor program at MetroWest Medical Center

FRAMINGHAM – Jessica Prologo arrived at Plymouth Church ready to donate blood.

Prologo, 38, of Framingham, tries to donate every two months. She arrived Thursday at the Red Cross mobile blood drive, ready to do it again.

“At some point in our lives, we’ll all need blood,” she said. “I try to pay it forward, before it’s my turn.”

Prologo’s donation came three days after MetroWest Medical Center announced that it will end its donor program on Dec. 19. The statement encouraged the hospital’s donors to give through the American Red Cross, the future supplier to the hospital. Dedham is the closest Red Cross location to the center, although on most days there are several mobile drives in the area.

Officials at MetroWest Medical Center declined to comment on their reasons for the closure.

- [MetroWest Medical Center to shut down blood donation program](#)

In September, the American Red Cross confirmed that it would no longer have mobile and community blood drives in central and western Massachusetts, and that it was laying off 52 workers effective Nov. 8.

A changing economic landscape appears to explain why blood donor programs are closing, according to one expert.

Dr. Anna Nagurney, a business professor at UMass Amherst, studies what she calls the “blood-supply chain.” She cited increased competition, declining blood donations and lower revenue at blood banks as reasons for closures.

“There is economic stress (on blood banks) to be more efficient,” Nagurney said.

The Red Cross said in a statement that its decision creates greater efficiencies, resulting in reliable and less expensive products and services for patients.

Nagurney said blood banks are experiencing a severe hit to their bottom lines from rising costs connected to expensive investments in equipment to ensure the safety of blood. Screening blood for new diseases, like the Zika virus, is one example, Nagurney said.

Another challenge is improved surgical techniques that result in far less blood loss. That results in less demand for blood, which means blood banks sell their product at a lower price. To combat that challenge, some suppliers are forming partnerships to deal with the rising costs of maintaining operations.

A 2016 study by the nonprofit RAND Corp. highlighted concern about the effect market forces have on blood supply, and whether hospitals will have enough blood in the event of unforeseen emergencies, including natural disasters, terrorist attacks and pandemics.

It also pointed to the consolidation of hospitals, giving them leverage over blood banks in setting prices for donated blood. If there was more balance in negotiations, blood centers could possibly charge higher prices, the report said.

Recommendations in the report included having the government subsidize blood banks for the cost of maintaining excess supply for emergencies, and expensive technologies.

RAND did not immediately respond to a request from the Daily News for comment.

Nagurney calls for more cooperation among the various institutions to save costs, instead of mergers and acquisitions. Savings could come from shared testing facilities and vehicles for delivery of blood to hospitals and medical centers.

She also echoed the RAND recommendation of government subsidies.

“That’s really, really important,” she said.

The AABB, a nonprofit organization representing individuals and organizations involved in transfusion medicine and cellular therapies, said it has several accredited blood collection centers in Massachusetts to ensure blood is available to patients in need of transfusion.

“AABB encourages all eligible donors to donate blood regularly to help ensure the adequacy of the blood supply,” the AABB said.

The irony of the recent blood bank closures, according to Nagurney, is they come at a time of year when donations traditionally drop due to cold and flu season, creating the potential for severe shortages in supplies.

John Zentis, 90, of Marlborough was unaware that MetroWest Medical Center is closing its blood donor program when he arrived to donate blood at Plymouth Church on Thursday.

“It’s not a good idea that they’re closing (blood donor programs). We need blood for everybody - me included, maybe,” he said.

Prologo has not donated blood at the hospital, opting instead to use the Red Cross. She worries about the closures, and what it means for patients.

“It’s pretty unfortunate if economics and business have an impact on what people need, in terms of the care and blood they need,” she said.

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