Drop in blood donors linked to fear of AIDS

ALEXANDRIA (AP) — “Fear, emotionalism and confusion” dominate Louisiana’s thinking on the subject of AIDS, a recent survey of 35 parishes indicates.

The survey was prompted by recent declines in blood donors and indications that the declines were linked to the public’s misconception about AIDS, said David Hebert, executive director of the Louisiana Blood Center in Alexandria.

“We have had a problem with getting blood donors in,” Hebert said, “And we’ve seen a dramatic decrease in first-time donors.”

In addition, he said, the blood bank system has had a 10 percent decline over last year’s donors.

The survey, conducted in October, shows that 73 percent of the 600 respondents believed there was some chance of contracting AIDS through blood donations.

“This means that the great majority of the people in our area are seriously misinformed,” said Annie Laurie Samuels, vice president of the Louisiana Blood Center in Shreveport.

AIDS — Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome — is a disease of the immune system that reduces the body’s ability to fight infection. It is believed transmitted from the exchange of body fluids from one individual to another, primarily through sexual contact.

Since the disease was identified in 1981, there have been 14,519 cases reported. Statistics from the Louisiana Department of Public Health show 152 cases in Louisiana through Oct. 16. Of that number, 111 have been in the Orleans and Jefferson Parish area.

In the survey, 27 percent knew AIDS could not be contracted through blood donations, but about 15 percent felt that it was “very likely” one could contract AIDS through blood donations and 26 percent viewed it as “possible, but unlikely.”

About 25 percent considered it a “slim possibility.”

“Interestingly, knowing the correct answer did not seem to relate at all to whether you had ever donated blood before,” Samuels added.

Of the respondents, 45 percent had previously donated blood.

Hebert assured citizens that they cannot contract AIDS or any disease from the act of donating blood.

“We take every precaution we possibly can to ensure that it is safe for the donor and the recipient,” he said.

The public’s misconception is due in part to confusion about the terms “donation” and “transfusion,” Hebert said. A blood donation is the act of giving blood later administered to a patient. A blood transfusion is blood received by a patient.

Since new testing of donated blood started in March, there have been no reports of transfusion-associated AIDS related to blood products transfused, LBC officials report.

The blood bank has launched a campaign to educate the public about AIDS. Brochures are being distributed to blood drive chairmen and handouts are being distributed to donors.

Statewide, the LBC must draw 77,000 units of blood annually to keep up with demand to supply 56 hospitals.