

Seroprevalence of HIV, Hepatitis B and C Viruses, and *Treponema Pallidum* among Blood Donors Attending the Garoua Regional Hospital Blood Bank, North Cameroon, a Cross-Sectional Study

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ABSTRACT

Background. Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), hepatitis B (HBV), and hepatitis C virus (HCV) are transfusion-transmittable infections (TTI). They currently constitute a major public health problem in Cameroon, like in other developing countries. Little is known about the seroprevalence of HIV, HBV, HCV, and syphilis among blood donors in northern region Cameroon. This study aims at filling the gap on the unknown sero-prevalence of those markers in blood donors.

Methods. We conducted a cross-sectional study from June 04, to July 08, 2022 at the Garoua Regional Hospital Blood Bank (GRHBB). A total of 201 donors were consecutively included and data on donor's sociodemographic characteristics were obtained by the national program's questionnaire. Serum samples from blood donors were tested using sensitive third generation Rapid diagnostic test (RDT) for presence of Hepatitis B surface antigens (HBsAg), and antibodies to human immunodeficiency (HIV-1/2), Hepatitis C (HCV) and *Treponema pallidum*; and quantitative enzyme-linked immunosorbent assays (ELISA) served for confirmation. Data were collected and entered into an Excel sheet and then exported to SPSS version 20.0 for analysis.

Results. A total of 201 blood donors were identified and the sex ratio (male/female) was 7/1, with a mean age of 32.12 ± 8.4 years (range: 19 to 57 years). Of all blood donors, 35/201 (17.4%) were infested by at least one of the four TTIs. Among blood donors, HIV, HBV, HCV and syphilis were 5 (2.5%); 26 (12.9%); 1 (0.5%) and 5 (2.5%), respectively. Co-infection with HIV-Syphilis was 1 (0.5%); and HBV-HCV 1 (0.5%).

Conclusions. This study has revealed the high prevalence of TTIs in blood donors who attended the Garoua Regional Hospital Blood Bank, identifying Hepatitis B as the greatest threat to blood safety in the North Region of Cameroon.

KEYWORDS: Blood donors, HIV, HBV, HCV, T. palladium, TTIs, North-Cameroon

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INTRODUCTION

Several patients are saved each year by blood transfusions. Yet, in most developing countries, people still die from an insufficient supply of blood and blood products, a real medication according to World Health organization [1]–[4].

This particularly affects women in the context of pregnancy complications, children suffering from malnutrition, malaria, or severe anemia affecting the vital prognosis, victims of trauma, especially among poor and disadvantaged populations [2], [5]–[7]. Transfusions save lives and improve

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health, but millions of patients do not have timely access to safe blood due to the lack of reliable donors [2]. Despite many medical advances made for the quality of blood to be transfused, infections related to blood transfusion remain a concern [2], [4], [8]–[10], and it also carries risks, in particular the transmission of blood borne infections, known as transfusion-transmittable infections (TTIs) which are major health challenges including different group of diseases [2]. The most common TTIs globally include human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), hepatitis B virus (HBV), Hepatitis C virus (HCV) and *T. palladium* [3], [11]–[13].

In Cameroon, two factors account for the difficulties encountered in achieving optimal transfusion safety, the existence in the population of a high frequency of various infections, some of which are transmissible by blood transfusion, and the still insufficient proportion of voluntary donors who constitute the safest group [13]–[16]. Efforts are made to reduce the risk of transmission of TTIs through appropriate screening techniques [17], [18]. The World Health Organization (WHO) issued a statement of testing the blood donors before transfusion for at least HIV, HBV, HCV, and *T. palladium* [19].

In the North region, the prevalence in the general population of HBsAg, HCV, and HIV is 21.53%, 0.60%, 1.6% respectively [20]–[22]. The prevalence of syphilis in North region is reported only for pregnant women with rate of 3% [23].

Investigating the TTIs can provide data about the magnitude infected individuals in the community, which is helpful in diagnosis and therapy of such diseases, and in articulating health policies and protocols. Studies on TTIs markers are reported in others regions of Cameroon [17], [18], [24]–[33], while there is none published study on those markers at the Garoua Regional Hospital Blood Bank a part the study on zika virus [34]. Therefore, our study aimed to investigate the prevalence and distribution of serologic markers of TTIs, in particular, anti-HIV, HBV surface antigen (HBsAg), anti-HCV, and anti-*T. palladium* among blood donors attending the GRHBB to provide data for better strategies for management of blood provision to blood banks.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design, Setting and Period

A cross-sectional seroprevalence study was conducted at the GRHBB, from June 04, to July 08, 2022. The GRHBB unit provides blood transfusion services for the population of the north region (about 2.4 million inhabitants, spread over an area of 163 500 km²).

Study Population

Two hundred and one blood donors were included among blood donors attending the blood bank, recruited between the periods of June 04, to July 08, 2022. The convenient sampling technique was used to choose blood donors. They were eligible to donate according to the national transfusion

program, consented, interviewed, and gave blood for serum screening for TTIs. All blood donors who fulfilled the national and regional blood bank criteria were included. Blood donors who did not meet the inclusion criteria (<18 years, >65 years, <50 Kg weight, very tired, history of long-term medication use, and unwillingness to give oral informed consent) were excluded from the study.

Data Collection

Data on sociodemographic characteristics were collected at the time of blood collection, using a structured questionnaire from the national transfusion program [13]. The laboratory results on blood group, serological results of HIV, HBs Ag, HCV, and syphilis were collected after laboratory testing.

Laboratory Testing

Blood group for each blood donor was determined using blood group antisera: anti-A, anti-B, Anti-AB and anti-D for Rh factor (DIAGAST, France).

Each donor was tested for HBs Ag by the HEALGEN One-Step Rapid Test, anti-HCV by the Aria Rapid Test, anti-HIV1/2 by Allere Determine, and anti-*Treponema pallidum* by the HEALGEN Syphilis test cassette. Confirmation test for HIV, HBV, HCV and Syphilis was done using highly sensitive Enzyme-Linked Immunosorbent Assays (ELISA). The assays were; HIV Ab/Ag Combo (DIASource immunoassay S.A., Belgium); HBsAg: ELISA version 4.0 (DIASource immunoassay S.A., Belgium); HCV: anti-HCV ELISA version 4.0 (DIASource immunoassay S.A., Belgium), and Syphilis: anti-*Treponema pallidum* antibody ELISA version 4.0 (DIASource immunoassay S.A., Belgium). Test protocol and result interpretation were done according to the manufacturer's instructions of each test kit.

Data Management

The collected data was entered into an Excel sheet and then exported to SPSS version 20 for analysis. Summary statistics such as frequencies and percentages were computed. Fisher's exact test was used to search associations between the serology of blood-borne pathogens and age, sex, and blood groups. A *p*-value <0.05 was considered significant.

2.7. Ethical Consideration

The study was carried out within the routine activities of the Blood Bank, without any additional investigation, after approval of the Higher Institute of Health Sciences, Techniques and Management, and the Regional Hospital. Donors were not identified by name and the participant had the right to interrupt participation at any time.

RESULTS

Socio-demographic characteristics of study participants

The study included a total of 201 blood donors with 176 (89.6%) males and 25 (12.4%) females. Of them, 180 (89.6%) were family replacement blood donors, 19 (9.5%)

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were remunerated blood donors, and only 2 (1.0%) were voluntary nonremunerated blood donors.

The donor's age ranged from 19 to 57 years with an average of 32.12 ± 8.4 . The most common age group of donors was found to be 26 to 35 years (51.2%) followed by age group of 36 to 50 years (22.9%), and ≤ 25 (22.4%), while the least age

group was >50 (3.5%). Further, 26.9% of the blood donors belonged to type A blood group, 28.4% had type B, 39.8% had type O, while 5.0% had type AB. In addition to this, 95.5% of the donors were Rhesus positive, while 4.5% were Rhesus negative. (Table 1)

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of blood donors at the Garoua Regional Hospital Blood Bank (n = 201)

Variables	Category	Frequency	(%)
Age	≤ 25	45	22.4%
	26-35	103	51.2%
	36-50	46	22.9%
	>50	7	3.5%
Sex	Female	25	12.4%
	Male	176	87.6%
Occupation	housewife	14	7.0%
	student	20	10.0%
	worker	167	83.1%
Residence	Rural	84	41.8%
	Urban	117	58.2%
Marital statut	Single	87	43.3%
	Married	114	56.7%
Education level	Nonformal education level 8		4.0%
	Primary	51	25.4%
	Secondary	99	49.3%
	University	43	21.4%
Blood group	A	54	26.9%
	AB	10	5.0%
	B	57	28.4%
	O	80	39.8%
Rherus D	Negative	9	4.5
	Positive	192	95.5
Donor type	FRBD	180	89.6%
	RBD	19	9.5%
	VNRBD	2	1.0%

Note: FRBD family replacement blood donors, VNRBD voluntary non-remunerated blood donors, RBD remunerated blood donors.

Seroprevalence of transfusion-transmittable infections

The proportion of samples that were tested positive for at least one TTI was 35 (17.4%). The general seroprevalence of markers for HIV, HBV, HCV, and syphilis was 5 (2.5%); 26 (12.9%); 1 (0.5%) and 5 (2.5%), respectively. Data for specific TTI are shown in Table 2.

In the present study, 2 (1.0%) of the 35 infected donors were co-infected with two pathogenic agents. The proportion of HIV-Syphilis co-infection was 1 (0.5%); HBV-HCV 1 (0.5%).

TTIs was higher in females compared to males with 24.0% (6/25) vs 16.5% (29/176) but the difference was non-significant ($p = 0.25$). For HBV in particular, we have the same tendency with 16.0% (4/25) vs 12.5% (22/176), $p = 0.41$. This study reported a

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higher seropositivity for the HBV marker rate among donors with non-formal education level with 37.5% (3/8) and primary level with 19.6% (10/51), than those with secondary 11.1% and university level 4.7%. These results show a significant difference ($p = 0.02$). Depending on the number of sexual partners, we observed a significant difference between donors ($p < 0.0001$). the positivity rate increases with the number of sexual partners across the majority of markers (HBV, HIV and syphilis). 100% of donors with 3 sexual partners had at least one positive marker. According to age group, residence, occupation, marital status, there was no significant difference, the different rates are reported in Table 2.

There was no significant difference in seroprevalence according to type of donors (Table 3) and blood types (table 4).

Table 2. Prevalence of serologic markers for specific TTIs and relationship to demographic factors of blood donors attending the Garoua Regional Hospital Blood Bank

Sociodemographic Variable	Number of donors	Any TTI No (%)	HBsAg + ve No (%)	HCV + ve No (%)	HIV + ve No (%)	Anti -TP +ve No (%)
Sexe						
Male	176	29 (16.5)	22 (12.5)	1(0.6)	4 (2.3)	4 (2.3)
Female	25	6 (24.0)	4 (16.0)	0	1 (4.0)	1 (4.0)
<i>p-value</i>		0.25	0.41	0.87	0.48	0.48
Age Group						
≤25	45	6 (13.3)	6 (13.3)	0	0	0
26-35	103	20 (19.4)	13 (12.6)	1 (1.0)	5 (4.9)	3 (2.9)
36-50	46	9 (19.6)	7 (15.2)	0	0	2 (4.3)
>50	7	0	0	0	0	0
<i>p-value</i>		0.60	0.89		0.34	0.51
Educational Level						
Nonformal education level	8	3 (37.5)	3 (37.5)	0	0	0
Primary	51	12 (23.5)	10 (19.6)	0	2 (3.9)	0
Secondary	99	15 (15.2)	11 (11.1)	1 (1.0)	2 (2.0)	3 (3.0)
University	43	5 (11.6)	2 (4.7)	0	1 (2.3)	2 (4.7)
<i>p-value</i>		0.16	0.02		0.86	0.46
Residence						
Rural	84	15 (17.9)	10 (11.9)	1 (1.2)	3 (3.6)	3 (3.6)
Urban	117	20 (17.1)	16 (13.7)	0	2 (1.7)	2 (1.7)
<i>p-value</i>		0.51	0.44	0.41	0.34	0.34
Occupation						
housewife	14	4 (28.6)	2 (14.3)	0	1 (7.1)	1 (7.1)
student	20	2 (10.0)	1 (5.0)	0	0	1 (5.0)
worker	167	29 (17.4)	23 (13.8)	1 (0.6)	4 (2.4)	3 (1.8)
<i>p-value</i>		0.36	0.68		0.36	0.16
Marital status						
Single	87	14 (16.1)	10 (11.5)	0	3 (3.4)	1 (1.1)
Married	114	21 (18.4)	16 (14.0)	1 (0.9)	2 (1.8)	4 (3.5)
<i>p-value</i>		0.40	0.37	0.56	0.37	0.28
Multiple partners						
0	13	2 (15.4)	2 (15.4)	0	0	0
1	171	17 (9.9)	15 (8.8)	1 (0.6)	1 (0.6)	1 (0.6)
2	10	9 (90.0)	6 (60.0)	0	1 (10.0)	2 (20.0)
3	7	7 (100.0)	3 (42.9)	0	3 (42.9)	2 (28.6)
		<0.0001	<0.0001		<0.0001	<0.0001

Note: P-value, Fisher's exact test to test statistical difference only for 2 × 2 tables, "+ve" positive, Any TTI Blood unit's positive for at least one of the tested transfusion transmissible infections

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Table 3. Seroprevalence of TTI among replacement and Voluntary Blood donors at the Garoua Regional Hospital Blood Bank

Type of donor	Number of donors	Any TTI No (%)	HBsAg + ve No (%)	HCV + ve No (%)	HIV + ve No (%)	Anti -TP +ve No (%)
FRBD	180	32 (17.6)	24 (13.2)	1 (0.5)	4 (2.2)	5 (2.7)
VNRBD	2	1 (50.0)	1 (50.0)	0	0	0
RBD	19	2 (10.5)	1 (5.3)	0	1 (5.3)	0
<i>p-value</i>		0.26	0.23		0.42	

Note: P-value, Fisher's exact test to test statistical difference FRBD family replacement blood donors, VNRBD voluntary non-remunerated blood donors, RBD remunerated blood donors, "+ve" positive, Any TTI Blood units positive for at least one of the tested transfusion transmissible infections

Table 4: Distribution of blood-borne pathogens by donor blood type among blood donors in Garoua Regional Hospital Blood Bank

Blood type	Number of donors	Any TTI No (%)	HBsAg + ve No (%)	HCV + ve No (%)	HIV + ve No (%)	Anti -TP +ve No (%)
Blood group						
A	54	9 (16.7)	5 (9.3)	0	3 (5.6)	2 (3.7)
AB	10	2 (20.0)	2 (20.0)	0	0	0
B	57	8 (14.0)	6 (10.5)	0	2 (3.5)	0
0	80	16 (20.0)	13 (16.3)	1 (1.3)	0	3 (3.8)
<i>p-value</i>		0.81	0.48		0.13	0.53
RH blood group						
Negative	9	1 (11.1)	1 (11.1)	0	0	0
Positive	192	34 (17.7)	25 (13.0)	1 (0.5)	5 (2.6)	5 (2.6)
<i>p-value</i>		0.51	0.67	0.95	0.79	0.79

Note: P-value, Fisher's exact test to test statistical difference only for 2 × 2 tables, "+ve" positive, Any TTI Blood unit's positive for at least one of the tested transfusion transmissible infections

DISCUSSION

Our study aimed to investigate the prevalence and distribution of serologic markers of TTIs, in particular, anti-HIV, HBsAg, anti-HCV, and anti-*T. pallidum* among blood donors attending the GRHBB. The issue of blood availability remains a challenge for all health structures. Securing this transfusion involves screening for transfusion transmittable infection markers, in particular, anti-HIV, HBV surface antigen (HBsAg), anti-HCV, and anti-*T. pallidum*. We used sensitive rapid tests in series and a confirmatory test (ELISA) in accordance with the national algorithm for 2nd referral structures at the regional level [13], to determine the presence or absence of TTIs markers in donors. All enrolled donors gave their consent and good laboratory practices were scrupulously observed. The current study is the first to document addressed on the seroprevalence of TTIs among blood donors in the North Region of Cameroon, at the GRHBB. TTIs are prevalent in Cameroon, some of which more prevalent than others in northern regions. The viral

markers of hepatitis B (HBsAg), HIV, and HCV seroprevalence within the population are, respectively, 21.53%, 0.60%, 1.6% [20]–[22]. A high risk of transmission of TTIs has been reported in developing countries [18].

The study included 201 donors; many being family replacement blood donors (89.55%), while voluntary non-remunerated blood donors were approximately 0.1 %. This was far from the WHO advocated rate of 80% [2]. Therefore a lot of efforts are still needed to improve VNRBD through sensitisation of population in Northern Cameroon. Family donors were more represented because they donate for acquaintances (friends, colleague) in urgent needs, similar to what was also reported in Douala Cameroon by Eboumbou Moukoko et al [17] and in Tanzania [35].

The number of male donors was higher than that of female donors (87.56% vs 12.44%), with a sex ratio of 7.0, a finding consistent with other reports [36], [17]. Female had more counter indication for blood donation than men.

This study indicated a high seroprevalence of TTIs, HBsAg, HCV, HIV and syphilis, which were, respectively, 12.9%, 0.5%, 2.5% and 2.5% in donors attending GRHBB. HBsAg marker was the most prevalent among blood donors in Garoua with 12.9%. in agreement with other studies in Cameroon, from Ymele et al. at Youndé Central Hospital

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which revealed a 12.14% prevalence [28], from Noah at the same hospital with 10.8% [32], and from Noubiap at Edea with 10.1% prevalence [25]. The high prevalence of hepatitis B can be the consequence of its prevalence at Garoua general population with 21.53% [20], and in specific group like pregnant women as reported (20.4%) by Ducancelle et al [37]. Hepatitis B infection is endemic in Garoua. The North and Far North regions have been reported to record the highest prevalence at the national level compared to other regions in Cameroun [20]. This high prevalence could be attributed to risk factors underlined by Fritzsche et al., such as: illiteracy, low level of exposure to the media, polygamy and multiple sex partners, ineffective use of condoms, lack of prenatal care, and the practice of some traditional rites and beliefs [38].

The prevalence of the HBsAg marker in the research appears to be higher than expressed by Dionne-odom et al. in bamenda with 6.8% [27], Samje et al. in the same locality with 4.7% [24], and that of Eboumbou et al. in Douala with 3.5% [17].

HBsAg was also reported among blood donors in other African countries, varying with studies and countries, ranging from 2.4% to 9.5% in Ethiopia [39]–[42], 5.57% in Sudan [43], and 18.6% in Nigeria [36].

Age and educational level ($p=0.6$) were not significantly associated with HBV infection. As a matter of fact, no statistically significant difference was found between individuals in the different age categories. However, in terms of education level, the probability of having an HBV infection was higher in individuals with non-formal education level (37.5%) compared to people with a higher education level (4.6%). This could be due to the fact that people with a high education level better understand sensitizations and put them into practice.

Concerning the HIV, the seroprevalence in our study was 2.5%, thus remaining higher than those previously reported by Eboumbou in Douala (1.8%) [17], Dionne-odom et al. (2.2%) [27], and Samje et al. (2.2%) in Bamenda [24]; but lower than those by Ymele et al. (4.44%) [28], and Noubiap et al. (4.1%) [25]. Moreover, this prevalence rate was low when compared to the results in a study conducted by Mayomo Fohoue, et al at the Central Hospital of Yaoundé which was 5.4% [44]. This decline could be explained by the impact of public awareness campaigns on the prevention of HIV / AIDS. The prevalence of HIV in the general population was also shown to be among the lowest in Cameroun (1.7%) [21]. The number of sexual partners was significantly associated with HIV infection ($P=0.00$) as sex intercourse is known to be the main route of transmission.

The HCV seroprevalence was 0.5% among all blood donors, which appears to be low compared to other studies conducted in Cameroun in which prevalences ranged from 1.3% to 4.8% [17], [24], [25], [27], [28]. Our prevalence of HCV marker

was similar to results found by Abdella (0.4%) [39], and close to those of Biadgo (0.8%) [41], in Ethiopia.

We found a seroprevalence of 2.5% syphilis among all blood donors in accordance to those reported by Samje with 2.2% [24] lower than those from other studies in Cameroun [17], [25], [27], Sudan [43], Ethiopia [40] and Tchad [45]; but higher than the studies by Buseria et al. in Nigeria [36], Abdella et al. in Ethiopia [39], and Alharazi et al. in Yemen [46].

In our study, the sero-prevalence was higher in women (4%) compared to men (2.2%), but this difference was not significant enough ($P = 0.6$) The most infected age group was [26-50[with 3.35% this preponderance that could be explained by the fact that this category was the most sexually active.

Regarding co-infections we had: HIV-syphilis and HBV-HCV during our study, with respective frequencies of 0.5% and 0.5% found in all donors. The prevalence of HIV-Syphilis coinfection was lower than those observed by Noubiap et al. (1.10%) [25]. Similarly, with regard to the coinfection with HBV-HCV, Ymele et al. observed a prevalence of 0.21% [28].

CONCLUSIONS

at the end of this study, which aimed at determining the seroprevalence of TTIs markers among blood donors at the Garoua Regional Hospital Blood Bank. The seroprevalence of HBsAg is alarming among other infectious markers. Deciders must take measures to fight this health threat, and more sensitization on voluntary blood donation is needed to fill the gap in the required pints of blood for patients in Garoua.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Our data may be available upon request.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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