VUMC Multidisciplinary Surgical Critical Care

Best Practice Guidelines for Transfusion of PRBC in Critically Ill Patients:

No active bleeding without evidence of active cardiac ischemia:

- **Hgb <7 g/dl:** Transfuse 1 units PRBC’s and reassess patient’s clinical status and Hgb level. Maintain Hgb level at 7-9 g/dl. Reassess Hgb as needed to be determined by patient’s clinical status.

- **Hgb 7 to 9 g/dl:** limit transfusions to patients with inadequate tissue O2 delivery (e.g., shock, SvO2<60, elevated lactate) and possibly to patients with significant comorbid heart disease.

- **Hgb >9:** RBC transfusion is not indicated.

No active bleed with known active cardiac ischemia:

- **Hgb <9 g/dl with evidence of cardiac ischemia, new onset tachycardia, shortness of breath/chest pain, or decline in O2 saturation:** Transfuse 1 units PRBC’s and reassess patient’s clinical status and Hgb level. Maintain Hgb level at 9-10 g/dl. Reassess Hgb after administration.

Active bleeding:

- **Acute Hemorrhage in hemodynamically unstable patient:** RBC transfusion should be guided by rate of bleeding and hemodynamic parameters rather than Hgb level. Consider activating the Massive Transfusion Protocol (MTP) for patients with ongoing exsanguination (attending anesthesiologist or surgeon only).

- **Acute Hemorrhage in hemodynamically stable patient:** Restrictive transfusion strategy unless inadequate tissue O2 delivery is documented (SvO2<60, elevated lactate, or hypotension or tachycardia unresponsive to crystalloid resuscitation).

- **Presence of co-morbid factors** – Consider transfusion with lesser degrees of blood loss.

*Rapid acute hemorrhage requires emergent control of bleeding source.
Background: Anemia can lead to inadequate oxygen delivery to tissues. The deleterious effect of severe postoperative anemia on mortality was shown in a study of patients with a postoperative Hgb ≤8.0 g/dL who refused blood transfusion for religious reasons [3]. Mortality rates increased as Hgb levels decreased below 7.1 g/dL. In a large retrospective study of VA patients, transfusion was associated with decreased adjusted hospital mortality in patients without comorbid heart disease when Hgb was <7-8 g/dl, but transfusion increased mortality above this Hgb level. Corresponding Hgb level thresholds were <8-9 g/dl when comorbid heart disease was present and <9-10 g/dl when the ICU admission diagnosis was acute myocardial infarction. Transfusion of blood, however, carries a significant risk of transfusion reactions, transmission of infectious agents, transfusion related acute lung injury, and immunomodulation [1]. In addition, Transfusion is independently associated with higher nosocomial infection rates, risk for sepsis, multiple organ failure, SIRS, longer ICU and hospital length of stay, complications, and increased mortality [8].

Hebert’s landmark study published in 1999 compared a restrictive vs. liberal transfusion strategy in critically ill patients. The authors demonstrated that patients restricted to a transfusion trigger of Hgb 7.0 g/dL with a target of 7.0 to 9.0 had lower in-hospital mortality than patients transfused at 10.0 with a target of 10.0 to 12.0 [2]. Overall, 30-day mortality was similar in the two groups, but the rates were significantly lower with the restrictive transfusion strategy among patients who were less acutely ill (APACHE II score of ≤20) and among patients who were less than 55 years of age.

Restrictive transfusion strategies may be used for hemodynamically stable patients with pre-existing cardiovascular disease [9]. A recent study in post-operative hip surgery patients with high cardiovascular risk factors showed there was no difference in recovery, mortality, or hospital complications of MI, CHF, CVA, infection, or thromboembolism with liberal or restrictive transfusion strategies [10]. Patients with recent history of an acute MI or unstable angina, however, may benefit from a higher transfusion threshold (trigger of Hgb 10 g/dL) [11], and patients with active hemorrhagic shock (i.e., trauma) benefit from protocolized blood product resuscitation vs. primary crystalloid resuscitation [12].

Thus, no single criterion should be used as an indication for red cell component therapy. Multiple factors related to the patient's clinical status and oxygen delivery need should be considered. Accordingly, the decision to transfuse erythrocytes must be based upon an assessment of the risks of anemia versus the risks of transfusion [4].

Last reviewed December 2015 by:
Lauren Wrisley ACNP-BC
Chris Hughes, MD

PI Approval January 2016:
Pratik Panharipande, MD
Caroline Banes, ACNP-BC
Katie Cole, ACNP-BC
Roslyn Green, ACNP-BC
  ➢ Retrospective review of 1717 pt’s in ICU. In pt’s who had transfusions nosocomial infection rate, mortality, ICU LOS, and hospital LOS were all significantly higher.

   ➢ Original TRICC Trial paper. Large randomized trial that demonstrated that a transfusion threshold of Hgb 7.0 confers equivalent outcomes as does a transfusion threshold of Hgb 10.0

   ➢ Retrospective cohort study of patients who refused transfusions due to religious reasons.

   ➢ Literature and best practice guidelines.

   ➢ Subgroup from TRICC Trial demonstrating that pt’s w/ cardiovascular disease do not benefit from higher transfusion thresholds w/ the possible exception of acute MI or unstable angina.

   ➢ Argues the need for blood conservation from the supply side.

   ➢ Hebert’s initial challenge of the 10 Hgb transfusion trigger while initiating the TRICC trial.
   Guidelines developed by American College of Critical Care Medicine, Eastern Association for the Surgery of Trauma, and Society of Critical Care Medicine.

   Systematic review of randomized clinical trials evaluating transfusion thresholds

    2016 patients who were 50 yrs old or greater with history of or risk factors for cardiovascular disease, whose Hgb <10 after hip fracture surgery assigned to liberal (Hgb <10) or restrictive (Hgb <8) transfusion guidelines


13. Ding ,YY, Kader, B, Christiansen, CL, Berlowitz, DR. Hemoglobin Level and Hospital Mortality Among ICU Patients with Cardiac Disease Who Received Transfusions. Journal of the American College of Cardiology. 2015 Dec; 66 (22): 2510-2518.