

Owen's outrage at failure over blood

DAVID Owen, co-founder of the SDP and once one of Britain's most charismatic and passionate leaders, has turned his back on the world of politics.

The former Foreign Secretary and trained medic says that nowadays he goes out of his way to avoid the political sphere, preferring instead to spend time with his family and concentrate on his London business.

But despite his resolution to "not get involved", Lord Owen says there is still one piece of unfinished business that continues to anger him - Britain's "failure" to become self-sufficient in blood products for the treatment of haemophilia.

"It is one of the few things that has continued to anger me ever since," he said.

"I can't believe that such a terrible thing should have happened, destroying the lives of so many people, and all these years later it has still not been resolved."

While Secretary of State for Health in 1975, Lord Owen made a commitment that within 18 months the UK would no longer need to import blood products from countries such as America which use paid donors.

Over £1m was set aside to build the new processing laboratory at Elstree but shortly after the decision was made, Lord Owen was transferred to the Foreign Office.

It was only several years later he discovered his promise had never been honoured.

In fact, production of blood products had actually slowed down while demand for them had risen.

The result is that thousands of haemophiliacs became infected with - and died as a result of - HIV and hepatitis C, a disaster which no-one has ever taken responsibility for.

In the North-East alone, 95 out of 105 haemophiliacs became infected with the two viruses and 77 have since died.

Lord Owen says he had to "fight hard" to get the commitment passed through Parliament in the first place and believes that once he left, self-sufficiency was "just put away down" on the list of priorities.

"It all goes back to my days at medical school when I remember walking through Athens one summer and being paid £10 to produce a pint of blood," he said.

"In those days that was rather helpful pocket money."

"I realised the system in many countries was one of a financial incentive rather than treating blood as a gift as we do here in the UK."

"Faced with this financial incentive it meant that when people were asked questions such as 'Have you ever gone yellow?' their answers were not always truthful."

Although it was already known the hepatitis virus could be passed on in the blood stream - hence the question about turning yellow - Britain was importing blood because the regional transfusion centres could not meet demand.

"I had to fight hard but what I do remember is that no-one argued the case against me on the basis of



Anger: Lord Owen, former Health Secretary and Foreign Secretary.

Former Health Secretary Lord Owen vehemently believes the infection of 4,500 British haemophiliacs with HIV and hepatitis C because of treatment they received through the National Health Service was avoidable. Louella Houldcroft reports.

medical safety - it was purely a case of money," said Lord Owen.

"I was absolutely staggered to discover years later that what I had promised had never been done."

"It was argued they had run out of cash but why?"

"My commitment was to become self-sufficient and to find the funds for it - whatever the cost."

"No doubt the new ministers coming in were not told why I had attached so much importance to this particular issue."

"But it was because I was a doctor, that I knew these were incredibly dangerous things we were doing."

"There were terrible risks associated with importing blood."

Dogged by the knowledge that Britain's failure to become self-sufficient had cost people their lives, Lord Owen eventually took up the case again in the late 1980s, this time on behalf of a constituent who was also one of the victims of the blood scandal.

He said: "This was a parliamen-

tary commitment I had made, not just an internal administrative matter."

"Once a decision has been taken it is perfectly legitimate for a new minister to change it, but only if they tell Parliament and that never happened."

"My colleagues were never fully committed to self-sufficiency."

Determined to get answers, Lord Owen wrote to the Health Commissioner, asking him to investigate the case.

Lord Owen said his request was turned down.

"To this day I am deeply offended by his response," said Lord Owen.

"For the first and only time I referred his refusal to investigate to the Parliamentary Select Committee only to discover they had no discretion to challenge his judgment."

In a final attempt to prove his case, in 1988 Lord Owen wrote back to the Health Commissioner requesting his files from the time when he was Health Secretary.

The response left him reeling.

"I was told I had no files - that they had all been pulped."

"But we are meant to live on - or a 30-year rule, I couldn't understand it."

He added: "Those documents would have revealed who came to the meetings, what submissions were made to me and what the feelings were at the time."

In 1990, haemophiliacs were made an ex-gratia payment for their HIV infection only.

This meant that thousands missed out while others were paid a fraction of what they deserved.

In his statement at the time of the settlement, the then Health Secretary Kenneth Clarke said: "It is an appalling tragedy that so many haemophiliacs were infected by HIV as a result of their NHS treatment."

"In my opinion, this tragedy was no-one's fault."

Lord Owen asked: "How does he know that?"

He added: "They refused to investigate my claims - there is no way he could claim that."

Lord Owen says he will support the haemophiliacs in whatever way he can.

"No-one has ever accepted responsibility for what happened or explained why it took place."

"Those infected with hepatitis C have never received a penny in compensation and I think that is quite scandalous."

"What happened is absolutely indefensible and personally I feel anyone who became infected after 1979/80 would have a strong case for extremely generous compensation from the Ministry of Health."

The Journal's
Bad blood scandal