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EVENING STANDARD ARTICLE 23/1/96 : GPs ALLEGED TO REFUSE TO
FUND TREATMENT FOR HEPATITIS C SUFFERERS

Line to take

The Department has found very little evidence of any problems with the provision of alpha interferon for haemophilia patients infected with Hepatitis C, who would benefit from it (some 20% of cases). The few cases referred to it have been since been satisfactorily resolved. Generally we would expect hospitals rather than GPs to prescribe any such treatment. If GPs agree to prescribe such treatments but there are mechanism for them to seek increases in their budgets where large sums need to be spent on the treatment of individual patients.

Background

1. Ministers have been under pressure, in particular from the Haemophilia Society, to make payments to **haemophiliacs** who have contracted Hepatitis C through blood or blood products. Some 4,000 people may have been infected in this way. This would generally have happened through treatment with Factor VIII before blood products began to be heat treated to destroy viruses, in 1985. The Government has said that these patients received the best treatment available in the light of knowledge at the time, and that in the absence of negligence it has not plans to make payments.
2. Last year a **look-back exercise** was began to trace, counsel and where necessary treat those who may have been infected with Hepatitis C through blood or blood products before testing of blood donations for hepatitis C began in 1991. Good progress is being made. It looks as if the original estimate of some 3,000 infected in this way who are still alive is probably about right.
4. As we promised during the July 1995 adjournment debate, DH is looking into allegations of problems with provision of alpha interferon for treatment of haemophilia patients infected with hepatitis C. Officials are in contact with the Haemophilia Society seeking any information they have about the nature and extent of the problem. They have reported problems in only 4 areas, and these have since been satisfactorily resolved.
5. Alpha Interferon is not suitable for all patients with proven hepatitis. Only 20% of infected individuals are likely to have long-term benefit, and it is suggested that treatment works best in the early stages of hepatitis. The drug has unpleasant side-effects and should not be used when the