

19 February 2007

STATEMENT BY:

*THE RT HON THE LORD MORRIS OF MANCHESTER AO QSO
BRITAIN'S FIRST MINISTER FOR DISABLED PEOPLE AND PRESIDENT
OF THE ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON HAEMOPHILIA*

**1757 HAEMOPHILIA DEATHS: FORMER LAW OFFICER OF THE CROWN
TO HEAD INDEPENDENT PUBLIC INQUIRY INTO THE SUPPLY OF
CONTAMINATED NHS BLOOD AND BLOOD PRODUCTS**

Former Solicitor General The Rt Hon (Peter) Archer of Sandwell QC is to head an independent public inquiry into what Lord (Robert) Winston has described as "the worst treatment disaster in the history of the NHS".

1757 haemophilia patients who were exposed to HIV and/or hepatitis C by contaminated NHS blood and blood products have died since being infected. Many more are now terminally ill.

Of 4670 patients exposed to hepatitis C, 1243 were also exposed to HIV; and notwithstanding improvements in treatment for both viruses, only 2552 patients with hepatitis C and just 361 with HIV are still alive.

Nor have haemophilia patients been alone as victims, as Anita Roddick has attested so movingly and to such telling effect in sharp criticism of Government spending priorities as they affect the raising of public awareness of Hepatitis C.

The Haemophilia Society first called for a Public Inquiry in December 1988. It did so because, as in the cases of thalidomide and vaccine-damaged children, there was scant if any prospect of legal action to achieve an independent examination of the causes and effects of the disaster or of the problems and needs of those afflicted and the bereaved families.

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Yet successive Governments have resolutely resisted a Public Inquiry since 1988, preferring in-house inquiries at the Department of Health into narrowly defined aspects of the disaster. Only officials were involved, allowing no opportunity to hear evidence from infected patients and the dependants of those who have died, or even from former ministers.

Thus with the legal road closed and any realistic hope of a Public Inquiry blocked, an independent inquiry held in public seemed to be the only way forward if the voices of those most affected were ever to be heard; the only way also to restore public confidence in the safety of blood supplies and Whitehall's ability to react to new viruses.

It was in recognition of this reality – and the added anguish caused by the disclosure that haemophilia patients had been treated with blood from donors who have since died of vCJD - that I consulted widely on the possibility of finding a lawyer of the highest standing to conduct an independent public inquiry.

I am pleased to be announcing today that The Rt Hon Lord Archer of Sandwell QC has agreed to fill that role. We could have no one either more highly qualified or more widely respected chairing the Inquiry.

Lord Archer's terms of reference will be: **"To investigate the circumstances surrounding the supply to patients of contaminated NHS blood and blood products; its consequences for the haemophilia community and others afflicted; and further steps to address both their problems and needs and those of bereaved families"**.

He will call on patients, bereaved dependants, former Health Ministers and other eminent witnesses to assist the inquiry, and hopes to receive the co-operation of the relevant Government departments.

Lord Archer will be joined by Lord Turnberg, immediate past President of the Royal College of Physicians, as Medical Assessor, and by Dr Judith Willetts, Chief Executive Officer of The British Society for Immunology; Dr Norman Jones, Emeritus Consultant Physician at St Thomas's Hospital, will also assist the inquiry as a consultant.

Lord Archer of Sandwell QC said today:

"I am delighted to be invited to conduct this independent public inquiry into the treatment of people with haemophilia using contaminated blood and blood products.

My intention is to open the inquiry in four weeks or so from now with a brief statement about its purpose and how we intend to proceed, followed by one setting out the historical background. This is intended to be factual and the inquiry will then adjourn. The present plan (which may change) is that we will then start hearing evidence a week or so later.

Our hearings will be held in public".

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Issued by:

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Full details of the Public Inquiry website and witness evidence questionnaire will be announced shortly.

Lord Morris of Manchester is available from two o'clock for most of Sunday afternoon - 18th February 2007 - Tel: GRO-C