

DRAFT LETTER FROM MS(H) TO RHA CHAIRMEN

Dear Chairmen

ACQUIRED IMMUNE DEFICIENCY SYNDROME (AIDS)

I have no doubt that you share my concern that all practicable steps must be taken to combat the spread of AIDS in the community; it is potentially the most serious public health matter that has arisen in recent years. I am writing to ask you to make financial provision to implement the measures needed within the National Blood Transfusion Service. I also give you advance warning that there are likely to be other developments with implications for your Districts and these are dealt with in the final paragraph.

Blood Transfusion

It is clear that one route whereby AIDS may spread more widely within the community is through the transfusion of blood and the use of blood products manufactured from blood donations. We have recently reprinted our leaflet "AIDS - IMPORTANT NEW ADVICE FOR BLOOD DONORS" and have asked that it be distributed individually to all blood donors (Health Circular (HC(85)3.) The next important step will be the introduction into the National Blood Transfusion Service of a screening test which can be used on all blood donations, as is presently done for hepatitis B and syphilis. Current screening tests for HTLV III antibody are still under development and will need evaluation. The Department is taking steps to co-ordinate evaluation of these tests, and will issue advice in due course.

It is hoped that a reliable screening test, compatible with existing equipment, will be available within a few months. There is as yet no firm indication on what this will cost. As a broad indicator it would be prudent to assume for planning purposes a cost of around £2. per test, which is the likely figure for tests being developed commercially in the USA, though we hope that a British test would be considerably cheaper. Although there are many competing calls upon your resources, this test, when available, will be an important preventive

development, and I must ask you as a matter of priority to ensure that sufficient funding is earmarked in 1985-86 for its introduction during that year. We need to be able to assure patients that treatment involving blood or blood products does not expose them to the risk of contracting AIDS. You will also be pleased to know that the Blood Products Laboratory at Elstree hopes that all its Factor VIII will be heat treated from April 1985 onwards.

Other Action

We have just issued Health Circular HC(85)2 which contains interim guidelines, drawn up by the Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens, on measures to be taken to safeguard those who, because of their work, come into direct contact with AIDS patients or specimens from them. The Chief Medical Officer has convened an Expert Advisory Group to provide professional advice to UK Health Departments on other issues, including the need for wider health service use of such an AIDS antibody test, and arrangements for patient counselling. Regional Health Authorities will be consulted on any proposed guidance to authorities in the light of the Expert Group's advice. Since these aspects will inevitably have resource implications, you may, however, wish to forewarn your Districts of these likely developments.