

File

Reference JAP/ML

7950

attached at 7049

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PR/OET
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AFH

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AIDS

I attach a paper (flag A), prepared by Dr Walford, which seeks Ministers' agreement to the funding and publication by the Department of an information leaflet on AIDS (flag B) for distribution by the National Blood Transfusion Service.

Lord Glenarthur will be aware from Dr Walford's note of 22 June (copy attached at flag C for ease of reference) of the steps being taken by the Department to prevent the spread of AIDS in the United Kingdom and a further submission covering the imports of blood products, developments in technology, research and UK production of Factor VIII will shortly be put to Ministers. Meanwhile, in view of the public interest in AIDS, the issue of the leaflet would be seen as a positive step to minimise the risk of the transmission of the disease through blood donation in this country.

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1 July 1983

cc Mr Alcock
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Mr Doran
Mr Nodder
Mr Cashman
Dr Oliver
Dr Walford
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Miss Spencer.
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ACQUIRED IMMUNE DEFICIENCY SYNDROME: ISSUE OF AN INFORMATION
LEAFLET THROUGH THE NATIONAL BLOOD TRANSFUSION SERVICE

PURPOSE OF PAPER

An information leaflet on AIDS has been prepared by the Regional Blood Transfusion Directors (copy attached at Flag A). Its main purpose is to discourage practising male homosexuals - who as a group carry the highest risk of transmitting AIDS in their blood - to refrain from donation. Funds are available for the Department to pay for the printing of the leaflet (estimated cost approximately £5,000), which would be distributed by the NBTS. In view of the sensitivity of the issue as it relates to homosexuals, Ministers' agreement is sought to the funding and publication of the leaflet.

BACKGROUND

There is increasing evidence that AIDS may be transmitted by the transfusion of blood which is taken from a person who is either suffering from AIDS or who is in the incubation period of the disease. Blood products, such as Factor VIII for the treatment of haemophilia, may also transmit AIDS and haemophiliacs are at particular risk of contracting the disease because Factor VIII concentrates are made from the pooled plasma of up to 5,000 donors. In this country there have been 12 confirmed cases of AIDS, 11 of which have occurred in homosexuals and one in a haemophiliac. It is believed that there may be under-reporting of cases.

Although there is no conclusive evidence, it seems very likely that AIDS is caused by an as yet unidentified virus. There is no laboratory or other test which can be used to detect AIDS in the blood of a potential donor. In the absence of such a test, Blood Transfusion Directors are anxious that information on AIDS should be made available to blood donors and that promiscuous male homosexuals - who as a group carry the highest risk of transmitting AIDS in their blood - should be discouraged from donating. There is absolutely no intention, however, that donors should be questioned about their sexual habits or be required to undergo a routine physical examination. The leaflet at Flag A has been prepared by the Regional Transfusion Directors who have asked the Department - which is responsible for the provision of much of the promotional literature distributed by the NBTS - to arrange for and to fund the printing of the leaflet.

DRAFT RESOLUTION OF COUNCIL OF EUROPE

If the Department were to fund the leaflet for distribution by the NBTS, this would be in conformity with a draft resolution prepared by the Committee of Experts on Blood Transfusion and Immunohaematology of the Council of Europe, which is to be submitted to the Committee of Ministers later this month. The draft resolution proposes that steps should be taken:

"To provide all blood donors with information on AIDS so that those in high-risk groups will refrain from donating."
(An example of an information leaflet for donors will be appended for the Committee of Ministers.)

SENSITIVE ISSUES

It is possible that a request to homosexual donors to refrain from donating could be interpreted by homosexual rights groups as a discriminatory move which would infringe their rights as individuals to donate their blood. Such a reaction

would be more likely to arise if there were widespread misunderstanding of the nature of the problem posed by AIDS and the Transfusion Directors are anxious to pre-empt such misunderstanding by publishing their information leaflet as quickly as possible. The Directors have secured the full cooperation of the Gay Medical Association - a society of homosexual doctors - who have undertaken to disseminate information on AIDS and to draw attention to the need for homosexuals who suspect they may be at risk from AIDS to refrain from donation. [It would also be possible for officials to meet with leaders of the various homosexual groups to ensure that they were fully informed of the medical background to this request, if such a meeting were felt to be desirable.]

RECOMMENDATION

In spite of the potential sensitivity of the issue, officials are of the view that early publication of the information leaflet is in the best interests of the public health.

MINISTERS ARE ASKED IF THEY WILL AGREE:

To the funding and publication by the Department of the information leaflet, for distribution by the NBS.

WHY IS A LEAFLET ON AIDS NECESSARY?

Recently there has been considerable publicity in the newspapers and on radio and television about a new, serious, but rare disease called AIDS.

Since AIDS may be transmitted by transfusion of blood and blood products, the National Blood Transfusion Service wants blood donors to have the facts about the disease.

WHAT IS AIDS?

AIDS is short for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. As its name implies, AIDS destroys the body's immune system which normally protects against infections and other illnesses. A person with the disease is therefore at risk of developing serious infections such as pneumonia, or even cancer. AIDS is probably caused by a virus, but this is not known for certain.

WHO IS AT RISK FROM AIDS?

Most of the information about AIDS has come from the USA where in the past two years or so, approximately 1,450 patients have been found to be suffering from the disease. Certain groups of people appear to be particularly susceptible; these are:

1. Homosexual men who have many different partners.
2. Drug addicts, male and female, using injections.
3. Sexual contacts of people suffering from AIDS.

It has also been found in a number of immigrants to the USA from the island of Haiti.

Patients with AIDS also seem more likely to have suffered, at some time, from various other diseases such as hepatitis B, syphilis or other sexually transmitted diseases.

HAS AIDS OCCURRED IN THE UNITED KINGDOM?

Yes, a few cases have been reported, although nothing like as many as in the USA. No-one knows whether more people in the United Kingdom will develop AIDS and a careful watch is being kept for possible cases.

CAN AIDS BE TRANSMITTED BY TRANSFUSION OF BLOOD AND BLOOD PRODUCTS?

Almost certainly yes, but there is only the most remote chance of this happening with ordinary blood transfusions given in hospital. However, in the USA about twelve patients suffering from haemophilia, an illness in which the blood will not clot, have developed AIDS. Haemophiliacs are more susceptible to AIDS because they need regular injections of a product called Factor VIII. This is made from plasma obtained from many donors. Should just one of the donors be suffering from AIDS, then the Factor VIII could transmit the disease.

HOW CAN THE RISKS BE REDUCED?

At present, there is no screening test the Transfusion Service can use to detect people with AIDS. So, until there is and until more is

known about this disease, donors are requested not to give blood if they think they may either have the disease or be at risk from it.

WILL DONORS BE QUESTIONED ON SEXUAL MATTERS WHEN THEY ATTEND
TO GIVE BLOOD?

DEFINITELY NOT.

The National Blood Transfusion Service has a very high regard for donors as extremely responsible people who give blood for the benefit of others and is confident that they would not knowingly put patients at risk from such a serious disease.

WHERE CAN DONORS OBTAIN FURTHER INFORMATION ON AIDS?

Any donor can discuss in confidence whether to give blood, with the doctor on the blood collection session, their own doctor or the Director of their local Blood Transfusion Centre.

Please remember, AIDS is a rare disease but a serious one.