

Tests on haemophiliacs positive NHS blood carries killer AIDS virus

BRITAIN'S Health Service blood supply has become contaminated with the virus thought to cause the killer disease AIDS.

New evidence confirms the worst fears that the battle to prevent it infiltrating blood used for transfusions and to make blood products has failed.

The virus likely to cause AIDS has been detected in patients treated with NHS blood concentrate in both England and Scotland, and yesterday the Haemophilia Society of Great Britain said the country's blood supply could no longer be guaranteed pure.

In America, where AIDS is well established among the homosexual

**YORKSHIRE POST
EXCLUSIVE**

By ANGUS KING, Medical Correspondent

community, people have also died after being given the disease accidentally in contaminated blood.

The victims have been hospital patients receiving blood transfusions and haemophiliacs who are treated routinely with a blood product called Factor 8.

In Britain, there are as yet no reported transfusion cases, but three haemophiliacs have inadvertently been given AIDS. Two are now dead.

Some 60 per cent of Britain's Factor 8 is imported from the United States and this was thought most likely to be responsible for passing on the virus. But it is now clear that the blood

collecting service and supply in Britain is itself contaminated.

Tests on haemophiliac patients at Edinburgh's Royal Infirmary have revealed AIDS virus antibodies in several patients. This means that they have been exposed to the virus itself, and it is possible they may develop the disease.

The crucial element in these tests was that the patients had been treated only with Factor 8 produced by the NHS in Scotland. An additional concern is that all Northern Ireland's supplies of Factor 8 are produced in Edinburgh by the Scottish Protein Fractionation Centre.

It is now known that two batches of Factor 8 produced at the Government's blood products laboratory at Elstree, Herts, were also contaminated.

In this country Factor 8 is made from plasma taken from whole blood given by volunteers. Doctors working in haemophilia centres consider that the NHS blood supply has been compromised and is no longer safe for their patients.

Yesterday the Haemophilia Centre Directors Organisation said it was issuing a policy recommendation to 100 medical units in Britain that patients should no longer be treated with the NHS product.

Dr. Peter Jones, director of the haemophilia unit at Newcastle Royal Victoria Infirmary, has already stopped using NHS Factor 8. All material for his patients will now be a new and more costly heat-treated Factor 8 imported from the U.S. by the Northern Regional Health Authority.

This heat-treated product is thought to be AIDS free, but is not available in England. Pressure from doctors on the Government has not made available any funds to deal with the present emergency involving haemophiliacs.

Dr. Christopher Ludlam, a consultant haematologist and director of the haemophilia centre at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, admitted yesterday that antibodies to the suspected AIDS virus had been found recently in 18 of his patients who were receiving only the NHS material. He told the Yorkshire Post:

"We picked up the HTLV 3 antibodies as part of a research project. We had hoped they would not be there. What this means is that these patients have been exposed to the virus.

"We know it was not from an American blood product — because all these patients have been treated only with Scottish Factor 8. They may or may not still have the virus — it is something we cannot tell.

"This amounts to evidence that the material in Scotland has been contaminated with HTLV 3, and this must have come from a donor or donors who have the virus.

"I can categorically say that to date there have been no cases of AIDS in Scotland attributable to Scottish Factor 8. My patients are all clinically well at the moment.

"On present evidence it would appear that although AIDS may be caused by HTLV 3 only a small percentage of people who become infected actually develop the disease.

"We do not know why?"

Partly as a result of this discovery, all Factor 8 in Scotland is being heat treated to kill the virus. This does not mean that people who unknowingly carry the AIDS virus will stop giving blood. Whole blood cannot be heat treated to make it safe, because it just congeals.

News of the positive testing was broken to haemophiliacs from Edinburgh and Glasgow at a meeting last night. They were told collectively that

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some of them were carrying AIDS antibodies.

Dr. Ludlam said: "If individual patients want to know where they stand I shall tell them."

Patients were strongly advised that from now on they should wear contraceptive sheaths during intercourse to protect their partners from danger.

They were also urged to take every precaution when making up their Factor 8 for home injections, and disposing of needles, syringes and plastic gloves.

Stringest safety precautions are already in force to protect medical and laboratory staff who are handling the blood at Edinburgh Infirmary.

I was told yesterday by another centre director: "Two centres here in London have had the same experience. Two batches of Factor 8 from Elstree have been contaminated with the AIDS virus."

At St. Thomas's Hospital, London, which serves haemophiliacs from SE and SW Thames areas, two patients who received exclusively NHS Factor 8 from Elstree are also carrying the suspected AIDS virus antibodies.

The director of the haemophilia centre there, Dr. Geoffrey Savage, said: "It is going to be hell on earth when this comes out. I am dumping all my commercial Factor 8 from the U.S. in favour of heat treated material.

"The majority of my patients will be getting it within the next three days. It is more difficult politically and practically to dump the NHS Factor 8, because if I did that straight away the switch-over would bankrupt hospitals in the area. It will have to be phased out.

"I am not prepared to wait and expose my patients to the risk. It is a horrible issue and a horrible dilemma."

Recent evidence suggested that NHS Factor 8 which is not heat treated might be contaminated.

"One cannot be sure, and from the patients' point of view it would be better not to use it until one is damn sure it is OK," said Dr. Savage.

Prof. Arthur Bloom, at University College, Cardiff, who is chairman of the Haemophilia Centre Directors Organisation, said he was aware of some problems with two batches of NHS Factor 8, one produced in Scotland and the other from Elstree.

"Regrettable though this is, it does not really constitute a comparable situation with the USA, where I believe almost every batch of Factor 8 is contaminated.

"As a matter of policy, we are now going to stop using NHS Factor 8 until it can be heat treated. The main thing that publicity can do now is to push the Government to make sure we can become self sufficient in heat treated Factor 8 in this country as soon as possible."

The Haemophilia Society said yes-

terday that it has warned the Government of the danger.

The co-ordinator, Mr. David Watters, said: "We drew the attention of the Department of Health to our worries about blood donor screening in the UK some months ago. We are not surprised therefore by the news that Scottish Factor 8 has been found to be contaminated with the HTLV 3 virus.

"This underlines the very great urgency attached to the immediate introduction of heat treated Factor 8, which the Haemophilia Society, along with the Yorkshire Post, has been pressing for since early November.

"We believe that apart from haemophilia itself there is, at the present time, no risk greater than AIDS. In recent weeks we have been all but overwhelmed by requests for accurate information and action to reduce the risks involved with blood products.

"What we must do at all costs is to try to avoid further spread of the virus. I have just spoken to a mother who has taken her kid off treatment. It is the worst thing to do — it can mean joint damage, ruined lives and the possibility of fatal bleeds."

The AIDS virus — Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome — destroys part of the human body's natural defences against disease, and leaves the way open for killer infections.

As yet there is no test available to detect it, there is no cure, and it may be present in the body without obvious effect for between 28 months and five

years. During this time it can be passed onto others.

Even the test which detects antibodies cannot be contemplated on a wide scale because of practical difficulties.

This test is anyway of limited value because only a small proportion of those exposed to the AIDS virus actually develop AIDS. It is not known exactly why this is.

AIDS has killed more than half its 7,000 victims in the U.S. — less than 100 from contaminated blood transfusions and a similar proportion of the 90 cases reported in Britain.

Some 70 per cent. of cases involve white, male homosexuals or intravenous drug abusers. It is believed that the virus is passed on by blood contact — anal intercourse in the case of homosexual and contaminated hyperdermics among drug addicts, making these the two groups of highest risk.

Scientists recently discovered that the suspected AIDS virus might be destroyed by heating Factor 8 to 70deg.C. As a result this new product is being widely used in America, Australia and Germany to protect haemophiliacs.

In England, however, heat treated Factor 8 is not yet licensed and, in the absence of any Government action to buy in supplies from abroad, haemophilia centres have to go cap in hand to their health authorities for extra cash to protect the lives of their patients.