

## WHY IS A LEAFLET ON AIDS NECESSARY?

During the past few weeks there has been considerable publicity in the newspapers and on radio and television about a rare, new and serious disease called AIDS. Since AIDS is important in the transfusion of blood and blood products, the National Blood Transfusion Service has decided that blood donors should be given the facts about the disease.

## WHAT IS AIDS?

AIDS is short for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. The cause of this illness is not known but it is most likely that it is an infection and that the agent responsible is probably a virus. As the name of the disease indicates, when a person develops AIDS the body's immune system, which normally protects against infections and other illnesses, is destroyed. This places that person at risk of developing a serious infection, such as pneumonia, or even cancer, both of which have caused death in a high proportion of affected patients.

## 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. Strikingly, it has occurred in certain groups of people who appear to be particularly susceptible; these are:

1. Homosexual men who have many different partners.
2. Men and women who are drug addicts using injections.
3. Sexual contacts of persons suffering from AIDS.

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

Patients suffering from AIDS are also more likely to have had hepatitis (an infection of the liver causing jaundice), syphilis and other venereal diseases.

## HAS AIDS OCCURRED IN THE UNITED KINGDOM?

Yes, a few cases have been reported, although nothing like as many as in the USA even allowing for our smaller population. It is not known whether many more patients will develop AIDS in the United Kingdom and a careful watch is being made for possible cases.

## CAN AIDS BE TRANSMITTED BY BLOOD TRANSFUSION?

Yes, it can. The chances of this happening with the usual blood transfusions given in hospitals is small but in the USA about ten patients suffering from haemophilia, an illness in which the blood will not clot, have developed AIDS in the past year. Haemophilia patients are more susceptible to AIDS because they need regular injections of a product called Factor VIII which is made from blood plasma obtained from many donors. If one of the donors is suffering from AIDS then the Factor VIII may carry the agent which can infect the patient.

It is therefore in the best interests of both blood donors and patients that every effort should be made to reduce the likelihood of AIDS spreading through transfusion of blood or blood products. At present, there is no screening test the Transfusion Service can use to

detect persons with AIDS and, until such a test can be found, it is important that people should not give blood if they think they may either have the disease or be at risk from it.

## WHOSE BLOOD IS AT RISK OF TRANSMITTING AIDS?

Until more is known about the disease, people who are in any of the groups with a greater risk of developing AIDS should not give blood even though they are in normal health at the present time.

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

DEFINITELY NOT. The National Blood Transfusion Service has a very high regard for donors for the benefit of others and after reading the information in this leaflet we do not think that these responsible people would put patients at risk from such a serious disease.

Every effort will be made, at blood collection sessions, to ensure that blood donors are in good health at the time of donation; a policy which has been followed during the entire history of the National Blood Transfusion Service.

## 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 an important one.