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Settlement for haemophiliacs 'rests in court'

By Celia Hall
Medical Editor

THE PRIME MINISTER yesterday blocked any chance of William Waldegrave, the new Health Secretary, reaching an out-of-court settlement for haemophiliacs with HIV or Aids.

In a letter to the Labour MP Alf Morris, which he made public yesterday, Margaret Thatcher stated that "the question of compensation has to remain a matter for the courts to decide".

The Prime Minister was replying to a letter in which Mr Morris had asked her to reconsider the Government's position on compensation and his earlier call for an independent inquiry to resolve the problem.

Her response caused anger and disappointment among representatives of haemophiliacs with HIV or Aids and their families, since it had been hoped that Mr Waldegrave would take a more conciliatory view.

During arguments over the release of Department of Health documents to solicitors acting for haemophiliacs who are fighting for compensation, High Court judges have stated that the issue should receive urgent government action.

Mr Morris said: "Mr Justice Ognall made a historic plea that the parties should go for a conciliated settlement. Mrs Thatcher's response amounts to her saying that she knows more than judges about what the courts can handle.

"Her response flatly contradicts

the strong indications that the Government was showing a new readiness to reach an out of court settlement."

The call for compensation payments to 1,200 haemophiliacs who were infected by contaminated NHS blood has all-party support and an all-party protest meeting will take place on 22 November. Mr Morris has tabled an early day motion calling on the Government urgently to conclude an out-of-court settlement.

Mrs Thatcher said in her letter that she was appalled by the tragedy. "I feel as moved as anyone else by the plight of all those haemophiliacs infected with the Aids/HIV virus," she wrote. She said she was sorry if her reply was disappointing.

David Watters, general secretary of the Haemophilia Society, said the distressing thing about the letter was that it continued to justify inaction because of legal red tape. "The case will go to court and will be fought all the way." Of the infected haemophiliacs 208 have already developed Aids and 130 have died.

The Government has made *ex-gratia* payments to the 1,200 of at least £20,000 each, but this was to help with their costs and with hardship, and was not compensation.

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