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From the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State

Rt Hon Lord Fraser of Carmyllie QC
Minister of Home Affairs and Health
The Scottish Office
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HEPATITIS C

Thank you for your letter of 22 December in which you have set out the case for immediate action to identify, counsel and treat those who may have been inadvertently infected with HCV by the NHS through blood transfusions.

I have accepted the recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Microbiological Safety of Blood and Tissues for Transplantation and given the go-ahead for a look back programme to be undertaken in England as soon as possible. More particularly I have instructed Dr Jeremy Metters, DCMO, the chairman of the MSBT to set up without delay an ad hoc Working Party to draw up guidance on the counselling and treatment options. The working party will consider all actions which need to be taken to satisfy Ministers' duty of care towards the patients concerned and this may include good practice guidance on treatment, research etc. I want to see the look back exercise started as soon as possible.

Now that I have given the go-ahead in England - and I hope that colleagues in Wales and Northern Ireland will join us - we have the opportunity to address this issue together using our combined resources and the expertise of our National specialists.

I hope that your medical experts will contribute to Dr Metters' working party and make available the results of the pilot research study already undertaken in Scotland.

I understand your wish to move quickly in Scotland to put in hand the look back exercise. I hope however you will recognise the overwhelming advantage of us moving forward on a UK wide basis. Any piecemeal approach, quite apart from giving all the wrong signals and causing confusion to the public, will seriously compromise the Government's defence that we have acted as quickly as possible on the basis of the best advice available and uniformly.

IMPROVING THE HEALTH OF THE NATION



So far as publicity is concerned I do not think there is any doubt but that this will be made known either through the forthcoming Panorama programme or through other journalistic action. Rather than wait for it to surface in an uncontrolled way I propose to announce the look back exercise by way of an inspired PQ next Wednesday 11th January. This will be supported by a Press Statement and a briefing for the media, including medical journalists, on the same afternoon. I would like to be able to confirm that this will be on a UK wide basis.

I am copying this to Rod Richards in the Welsh Office and Malcolm Moss in Northern Ireland Office.

GRO-C

TOM SACKVILLE