



NATIONAL BLOOD TRANSFUSION SERVICE

Director: C. C. Entwistle, M.B.Ch.B., F.R.C.Path.

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Your Ref.
Our Ref.

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4th February 1981

Dr. R.H. McNeilly
Acting Regional Medical Officer
Oxford Regional Health Authority
Old Road
Headington
Oxford

Dear Dr. McNeilly,

HEPATITIS TESTING OF BLOOD DONORS AND ANTENATAL PATIENTS

For Health and Safety reasons it is obligatory to ensure that the sera of all blood donors and antenatal patients are tested for the presence of hepatitis antigen. It is also imperative that a test of acceptable sensitivity is employed using adequate daily controls.

This Centre, together with N.E. Thames, Brentwood, BTS, have been collaborating with the Blood Products Laboratory, Elstree, in the development of a radioimmune assay which satisfies the above requirements. During the experimental development stages, BPL have been supplying us with the necessary kits free.

The situation now is that the kits are ready for distribution to all NBTS Centres wishing to use them and negotiations have been proceeding for some time on the likely cost implications. I am told by Dr. Richard Lane, Director of BPL that DHSS Auditors have costed their product at not more than 6p per test. During the Autumn of 1980 the matter was considerably complicated by the fact that the British firm, Burroughs Wellcome, who have also been developing a similar test, proposed to market their product in this country at 36p per test list price and possibly in the order of 27p per test to bulk users such as ourselves. Burroughs Wellcome I believe lodged a protest with the Department of Trade claiming that BPL would be guilty of unfair practice if they were to supply the NBTS with their own product at the alleged cost price of 6p per test.

I have this morning heard from Dr. Lane that there will be a meeting of the BPL Joint Management Committee on Friday of this week when it is likely that an agreement will be announced for the BPL product to be released as from 1st April 1981 to those wanting it for "about 20p per test". I am also told that a written statement is to be made about this which will be circulated, among others, to all Regional Treasurers.

If we do not accept this situation, we will be obliged to use Commercial products for a considerably greater outlay and as there is some doubt about the sensitivity of the latter, any serum or plasma sent to EPL and tested at source by one of these Commercial products will, for safety's sake, be re-tested at EPL by their product, thus adding substantially to overall NHS expenditure.

On the other hand, if we accept the EPL product, and I must say that we have been very satisfied with our last two years experience with it, then for the year commencing 1st April, we shall be faced with the following estimated additional expense:

125,000	donors p.a.	
30,000	antenatals p.a.	
10,000	miscellaneous tests, controls, staff members etc.	
165,000	total kits @ 20p:	<u>£33,000</u> p.a.*

It is unfortunate that the situation has crystallised so late in budgetary planning but I felt you ought to be informed of even this incomplete and estimated commitment at the earliest opportunity.

I must say that I view the above developments with grave concern. I think it is to be deplored that the NHS is being allowed to be held to ransom by Commercial interests in this way, whether the firm concerned is British or not. What is potentially far more serious is that this could become the thin end of a very large wedge.

I have heard of another firm which is considering lodging a similar unfair trading protest, this time against the Blood Group Reference Laboratory who are providing a blood testing reagent (AHG) to the NBTS, and this sort of performance could very well be repeated in respect of a number of other products.

The NHS has always tried to function in a strictly non-profit self-help manner, indeed has often existed on a shoestring, and the present saga of the EPL hepatitis test must be viewed as setting a very dangerous and potentially enormously expensive precedent.

Yours sincerely,

GRO-C

C.C. Entwistle
Director

c.c. Mr. A.R. Bailey, Regional Treasurer

✓ Dr. R. Lane, BPL

Dr. G.W.G. Bird, Director, Birmingham BTS and Chairman of the
Western Division BTS Directors and Consultants

* VAT to be charged extra