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THE INDEPENDENT

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Contaminated blood kills 12

Doctors believe 5,000 adults and children have caught liver disease from transfusions and clotting agents

BY CELIA BAILL
Medical Editor

Twelve British men with haemophilia have died from the liver disease hepatitis C after they were given contaminated concentrates of blood.

All 12 died last year. At least 2,000 more people are infected, and four have had liver transplants as a result.

Another 3,000 adults and children, who are not haemophiliacs but did receive fresh blood transfusions before 1990, may also have been infected, according to the Blood Transfusion Service, but are unaware of their condition.

The emergence of these previously unreported deaths echoes the case of hundreds of haemophiliacs who caught the AIDS virus from contaminated blood. Haemophilia is an inherited disease whose major symptom is the failure of the blood-clotting mechanism. Haemophiliacs, who are almost male, often have to be given blood-clotting agents – called “factors” – which are produced from donated blood.

Doctors say 90 to 95 per cent of haemophiliacs who used factors regularly before May 1985 have contracted hepatitis C.

Now the Haemophilia Society is considering seeking redress from the Department of Health. The society is organising meetings to inform haemophiliacs and is in contact with the department.

The National Blood Authority is also considering what ac-

tion to take. Dr Percy Dean, chairman of the Standing Advisory Committee on Transfusion Transmitted Infections, said: “These working in the field believe we have a duty of care of patients and that we should be open about this. We are deciding how we can best proceed.” At the same time, the consultants who head the regional haemophilia centres around the country have their own working party on haemophilia and hepatitis.

The hepatitis C virus (HCV) was only identified in 1989. Before that, it was recognised as non-A, non-B hepatitis. It is a slow, chronic condition leading to cirrhosis of the liver in 20 per cent of cases. Ten per cent of those go on to liver failure in five years. Symptoms of liver disease can take 10 to 30 years to develop. Doctors admit they still do not know enough about the progress of the disease.

Hepatitis C is transmitted by blood-to-blood contact, mostly via transfusions and injections. In 1985, blood products, including the clotting agent Factor VIII, were subjected to anti-viral heat treatment designed to eradicate HIV. However, fresh whole blood or fresh parts of blood cannot be treated in the same way.

In June 1991, the Department of Health paid out a total of £42m to 1,200 haemophiliacs who caught HIV from factors made from infected blood.

In September 1991, an adviser from the Department of Health, the Blood Transfusion

Service began to screen donors for hepatitis C to protect the blood supply. Haemophiliac boys up to the age of 10 who use factor are not, therefore, at risk. No cases of hepatitis C in this group have come to light for the past nine years.

Simon Taylor, vice-chairman of the Haemophilia Society, said: “At this stage, because the information about hepatitis C is so slight we are not sure which way we should proceed.”

“The difficulty is the vast majority of haemophiliacs have no hepatitis symptoms because the disease could take 30 years to show itself. There is no medical consensus on diagnosis, treatment or prognosis. One thing we are considering is seeking compensation when people become ill.”

Haemophilia experts say the true number of patients infected with hepatitis C is not known but 2,000 is a reasonable estimate.

There are 10,000 men and boys with haemophilia in the UK. Of these, 2,500 – including 500 boys aged under 10 – need factors regularly, the rest occasionally. Mr Taylor said most of the 2,000 adults had contracted hepatitis C.

The infection rate is very high because between 20,000 and 30,000 donations are needed to produce the factors.

Dr Ala, who is also director of the West Midlands Blood Transfusion Centre, said they were able to arrive at the estimate of the 3,000 transfusion patients with hepatitis C by checking the records of blood donors who were subsequently found to have hepatitis C.

“What we now have to consider is whether we identify the recipients and contact them. These people may have no symptoms at all. These are very difficult issues,” said Dr Ala.

A spokesman for the Department of Health said: “We have the greatest sympathy for these people.”

“There are no plans to extend the settlement scheme for haemophilia patients who are HIV-positive to patients who have been infected with hepatitis C. The Government does not have a policy of no-limits compensation. Patients received the best available treatment in the light of medical knowledge at the time.”

Background, page 3



Leslie Thorpe: “It really seems to be a miracle. I am having a marvelous time. I can barely believe it.” Photograph: Andrew Hansen

Transplant gave victim a new life

To describe Leslie Thorpe as a happy man misses the mark by a mile. He is ecstatic, writes Celia Bail.

Mr Thorpe, 46, a company director who lives in Brighton, has been a haemophiliac all his life. For 12 years he suffered from hepatitis C, infected by a contaminated supply of the blood-clotting agent Factor VIII.

Until this June, five months ago, extremely ill from a failing liver caused by the hepatitis, Mr Thorpe had a successful liver transplant. The transplant “cured” his haemophilia and treated it with the drug interferon cured his hepatitis.

“It really seems to be a miracle. I am having a marvelous time, I am eating well, walking the dog, staying awake all day and going out at night. I am stronger. I don’t know what to do with all my energy,” said Mr Thorpe.

As a boy he coped reasonably well with his haemophilia. “I was always covered in bruises. I looked like a battered child and I had nosebleeds at night,” he said.

In 1982 he needed to have a tooth extracted and was given Factor VIII before the surgery. “About a month later I became very ill with hepatitis but I got over it. Then in 1990 it all

started coming back.” He was admitted to the prestigious liver unit at King’s College Hospital, London. Again he recovered, but not fully.

For more than three years his liver disease progressed. “I was yellow [jaundiced]. I was tired, I was weak, I couldn’t keep food down. I had always maintained a good level of fitness. It was difficult.”

Facing liver failure, Mr Thorpe was offered a transplant operation. “I was absolutely terrified. All my life I knew haemophiliacs could not have operations. Two brothers died because they could not have surgery. I absolutely be-

lieved I would not survive it,” he said.

But medicine had moved on, his physician, Dr Christopher Tibbs, a hepatitis specialist at the liver unit, explained.

Mr Thorpe’s blood was boosted with large amounts of Factor VIII before his surgery so that his blood would clot. Afterwards his new liver took over. Dr Tibbs said that because Factor VIII is made in the liver, the donor liver from a non-haemophiliac removed the symptoms.

Mr Thorpe said: “At my last test my blood was clotting normally. I still keep pinching myself. I can barely believe it.”

US rates raised to cool economy

FROM DAVID USBORNE
in Washington

The US Federal Reserve raised interest rates yesterday for the sixth time this year and fears that the strong US economy risks triggering renewed inflation. Some economists expect Kenneth Clarke, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, to follow suit soon in Britain for similar reasons.

Wall Street share prices fell sharply on the news. The Dow Jones index, up more than 20 points before the announcement, reversed the day’s gains to trade 6.06 lower at 3,833.09 points half an hour before the close. The dollar rose 112 points to DM1.5538.

The Reserve’s Federal Open Market Committee raised rates by three-quarters of a percentage point, exceeding Wall Street expectations of a half-point rise.

In spite of five increases in rates since February, the US economy appears still to be growing at an annual rate of about 3 per cent. Influencing the Fed yesterday was news that US industry is operating at 84.9 per cent of its capacity, the highest level for almost 15 years and close to the point where bottlenecks trigger inflationary pressures.

Some experts had argued it was that the Fed was over-inflating the indicators and strong growth might not mean inflation because of the changed nature of the American economy, with less manufacturing and stronger foreign competition. “They are fighting yesterday’s war,” said James D. Robinson, former head of American Express.

The decision will not be welcomed by President Bill Clinton, battered by the strong Republican gains in last week’s elections. Before the announcement Mr Clinton, who has highlighted to voters the strong economy and low unemployment rate, said he hoped the Fed would “do their best to keep the economy going”.

The Fed’s action will take short-term rates in the US to their highest level in three years. The Fed said it was raising its discount rate – the rate a charge banks for loans – to 4.75 per cent immediately. *Bellie Strongman, page 32*
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