

FOR SUNDAY NEWSPAPERS

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THE PRESS COUNCIL

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A newspaper was justified in reporting the risk that patients might contract AIDS from transfusions of blood imported from America, but used extravagant and alarmist terms not justified by the evidence, the Press Council said today.

The Council upheld a complaint against THE MAIL ON SUNDAY to the extent that the story about AIDS, the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, should not have been treated in such unqualified terms.

Mr Peter Jones, Director of the Northern Region Haemophilia Service, Newcastle upon Tyne, complained that the newspaper published an inaccurate and highly exaggerated story about blood transfusion supplies, causing needless distress and suffering, especially to haemophiliacs.

Under the front page lead headline "Hospitals using killer blood", the newspaper reported that blood imported by the National Health Service from the United States could be threatening the lives of thousands of British people. It said the sexually transmitted killer disease was present in contaminated blood used in transfusions and operations.

The report said that two men in hospital were suspected to be suffering from AIDS, after routine transfusions for haemophilia.

An immunologist was quoted as saying it seemed madness that blood supplies were coming from a country suffering from an epidemic of an incurable killer disease that nobody could test for. The directors of blood transfusion centres and of the 110 haemophiliac clinics had called emergency meetings, the report said. It added there were fears that British donors had already infected blood banks with AIDS.



Mr Jones complained about the use of the word "virus" when there was no proof that a virus caused AIDS, and said the use of the words "killer blood" was indefensible. He said that when the story was written it was untrue to say two men were suspected to be suffering from AIDS after transfusions. It was untrue when the article was written that haemophilia directors had called an emergency meeting, although they had met afterwards.

The managing editor, Mr George Woodhouse, produced a leaflet published by the Department of Health and Social Security, which he said set out many of the points highlighted in the article.

The newspaper's medical correspondent, Susan Douglas, informed him that the two suspected AIDS cases were confirmed within a week.

He said the DHSS leaflet referred particularly to the question of whether AIDS could be transmitted by transfusion of blood and blood products, and stated this was almost certainly the case, though there was only a remote chance of it happening with ordinary blood transfusions in hospital.

In the US a very small number of haemophiliacs had developed AIDS, he said; they were more susceptible than other patients because they needed regular injections of a blood product called Factor VIII, made from plasma obtained from many donors.

The editor, Mr Stewart Steven, said the newspaper was proud of its contribution to the understanding of a terrible malady. He believed the article and others which followed caused discomfort to the medical profession and not to the patients. They created exactly the sense of emergency which was hitherto lacking.



The Press Council's adjudication was:

Newspapers can legitimately and appropriately draw attention to medical risks where there is evidence of them but it is their duty to weigh such evidence with great care. They should avoid presenting stories dealing with medical matters in ways which cause unnecessary alarm, distress or suffering.

In this case the subject was one of serious concern and a proper one for newspaper inquiry and report. The article contained some inaccuracies but, more importantly, was presented in extravagant and alarmist terms which were not justified by the evidence contained in it or produced since. Its headline "Hospitals using killer blood" was unacceptably sensational.

The story generally should not have been treated in such unqualified terms, and to this extent the complaint against the MAIL ON SUNDAY is upheld.

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