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THE FIGHT AGAINST AIDS - MORE GOVERNMENT MONEY

John Patten, Parliamentary Secretary for Health, today spoke about the Government's concern about AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). He gave details of the measures already taken to control the spread of the disease and plans for future action and funding.

Mr Patten said: "AIDS is a very serious disease. ^{Although} the number of cases in this country is still small - by the end of July this year 196 patients had been confirmed as AIDS cases of whom 110 had died - ~~but~~ we know that the number of new cases is ^{bound} ~~likely~~ to increase steadily over the next few years. Some 10,000 people may already have been exposed to the virus, but only a small proportion of these will go on to develop clinical AIDS. It is vital to do all we can to control the further spread of the disease and to help those who have already been exposed to the virus.

"In this country we have had the benefit of learning from the experience of the United States where more than 12,000 cases have occurred. Knowledge of the disease is progressing rapidly and much has already been achieved but much remains to be done. In the absence of a cure for AIDS or a vaccine which protects against the virus we must take all the precautions indicated in the light of current knowledge and experience.

"Health education must be at the centre of our strategy to control the spread of the disease. We ~~will be~~ ^{are urgently} considering what new initiatives ~~can be supported~~ ^{are available} to improve understanding of the disease by those most at risk of contracting AIDS and also by the general public and the way in which its spread can be ~~prevented~~ ^{controlled}. We must also consider what services need to be provided for those who are infected with the virus and how these services should be funded. The Government has already given nearly £1 million towards combatting the disease. With the prospect of increasing numbers of cases over the next few years we need to estimate what the future burden on health authorities will be. We have therefore approached the Thames Regional Health Authorities, which have the greatest experience in treating AIDS cases, about the resource implications of the disease. The information they have provided will enable us to calculate what additional financial support should be made available to the NHS to provide adequate testing, treatment and counselling services in the future.

"The Government is keenly aware of public concern about AIDS. We are tackling the disease on a broad front and, with the continuing co-operation of those in the main at-risk groups, I am hopeful that we will be able to control the spread of the disease and prevent the appalling suffering which accompanies it".

NOTES FOR EDITORS

Listed below are the major measures already taken to control the spread of AIDS in the areas of:

- * health education
- * screening of blood donations
- * other blood testing
- * heat treatment of blood products
- * counselling
- * research
- * information for health professionals
- * co-operation with the voluntary sector
- * setting up an advisory group of experts
- * funding

?/h. confidentiality

I suggest an additional note covering extra points picked up by the Public Health

Health Education

The main at-risk groups are homosexual and bisexual men; intravenous drugs abusers; haemophiliacs who have received contaminated blood products; and the sexual contacts of people in these groups. Information leaflets have been produced by the Health Education Council, the Haemophilia Society and the Terrence Higgins Trust. A leaflet warning those in the at-risk groups not to give blood has also been produced for the National Blood Transfusion Service (NBTS).

Screening of Blood Donations

The risk of contracting AIDS from a blood transfusion is already extremely small, but the planned introduction of a screening test within the NBTS will reduce this risk still further. All the commercially available screening tests have been evaluated by the Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) and two kits are now being tested in the NBTS. Routine screening of all blood donations should be introduced by mid-October.

Other Blood Testing

Health authorities are also making arrangements for blood samples to be taken in sexually transmitted disease clinics so that people who are worried that they may have been exposed to the virus can have their blood tested to discover whether they are antibody positive.

Heat Treatment of Blood Products

All Factor VIII - a blood clotting agent needed by haemophiliacs - is now being heat-treated. The major redevelopment, costing over £35 million, of the Blood products Laboratory in Elstree will come on stream at the beginning of 1986 with the capacity for achieving self-sufficiency in blood products by the end of that year.

Counselling

Anyone whose blood is found to contain antibodies to the AIDS virus will be offered counselling. The counselling will also extend to families and friends. A counselling training course has been developed at St Mary's Hospital, Paddington, and over 180 people will be trained by the time the blood test becomes available in October.

Research

The Government-funded Medical Research Council is co-ordinating a number of important research projects costing nearly £370,000. The MRC also maintains valuable links with researchers working in the United States and elsewhere.

Information for Health Professionals

Special guidance has been produced for groups of health professionals who are involved in caring for AIDS patients. This has included:

- general information for doctors on the diagnosis of the disease and infection control measures
- information for nurses on the care of patients living in the community
- guidelines of safety measures for health workers and those working in the emergency services

Co-operation with the Voluntary Sector

The voluntary sector has a major role to play in offering advice, support and counselling. The Government has given £25,000 to the Terrence Higgins Trust to support its work on AIDS and £15,000 to the Haemophilia Society.

Expert Advisory Group on AIDS

The introduction of all these measures in such a short time has been made possible by the setting up of an advisory group of experts on AIDS (EAGA). Sub-groups of EAGA work on various topics such as counselling and blood testing and give advice on the policies to adopt.

Monitoring

The Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre (CDSC), which is part of the PHLS, began national surveillance of AIDS in 1982. They have close contacts with similar centres in other countries including the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in the United States and the WHO AIDS Collaborating Centre for Europe in Paris.

Overall Funding

The Government has so far contributed nearly £1 million directly towards the fight against AIDS. Besides funding various research

projects it has contributed:

£50,000	for the training programme for counsellors
£58,000	for evaluating screening tests at PHLS
£80,000	for evaluating screening tests in the NBTS
£750,000	for testing blood samples at PHLS
£25,000	for the Terrence Higgins Trust
£15,000	for the Haemophilia Society

£978,000

Confidentiality

A letter has been sent to all health authorities reminding them that anyone who goes for a blood test at a sexually transmitted disease clinic must be treated under terms of strict confidentiality. AIDS patients and people who are antibody positive tested or treated at STD clinics are protected by the venereal disease regulations. A doctor may only pass on information about such persons to a third party (other than another doctor involved in the patient's treatment) with the permission of that patient. This applies equally to male and female patients. In all cases, however, every attempt will be made to persuade the patient to give his or her permission to enable contacts of either sex to be informed of their risk and given appropriate medical advice. If confidentiality is not guaranteed people may not come forward for testing, which defeats the object of making the test available.