

UK inquiry should establish why contaminated blood products were given to people with haemophilia

EDITOR—A government inquiry has been announced into the infection by contaminated blood products of people with haemophilia in the Republic of Ireland; this follows a public inquiry into these issues in Canada.^{1,2} A similar inquiry should be conducted into the plight of people with haemophilia in the United Kingdom who have been infected in the same way.

Some 4800 people with haemophilia in the United Kingdom are believed to have been infected with hepatitis C virus through the use of contaminated blood products in their treatment by the NHS before 1986. Of these, more than 1200 were also infected with HIV. Nearly every patient with haemophilia who was treated before 1986 was infected; many have died as a result.

People with haemophilia throughout the world have been affected, but the response from various governments has differed. The Irish government, in addition to setting up a tribunal of inquiry, has set up a compensation scheme to provide financial assistance to all those who contracted hepatitis C or HIV infection, or both, from blood or blood products. Similarly, after a four year inquiry the Canadian government has set aside C\$1.1bn (£458m) to compensate an estimated 20 000 people. In France, Switzerland, and Japan government ministers and officials have faced charges relating to blood safety and infection. In the United Kingdom, however, the government has failed even to hold an inquiry into how and why patients with haemophilia came to be infected with bloodborne viruses before 1986.

The previous government ordered a look back study among patients infected with hepatitis C virus through blood transfusions, but this did not include patients with haemophilia who were infected by blood products. This omission means that there are still no official figures on hepatitis C in haemophiliac patients, despite these patients being one of the most widely monitored sectors of the UK population for bloodborne viruses.

The Haemophilia Society believes that it is important to establish how what has been described as one of the greatest treatment disasters in the history of the NHS took place. It has called on the health secretary for a full inquiry and also contacted the chairman of the select health committee. Why is an inquiry not appropriate in the United Kingdom? Firm information about something that has wrecked so many lives would help in the targeting of NHS services to those affected. It would also ease the anguish of those who have suffered, by giving them the answers they need and recognition of their plight.

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- 1 Spurgeon D. Canada creates new national blood service. *BMJ* 1997;315:1561.
- 2 Kondro W. Final Krever report paints picture of regulatory dysfunction. *Lancet* 1997;350:1688.