



## SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

## Health Department

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*Dear Jennifer,*

**HEALTH AND COMMUNITY CARE COMMITTEE  
 HEPATITIS C**

The Minister for Health and Community Care, Susan Deacon MSP, has asked me to write on her behalf to thank the Convener for her various letters about the fact-finding exercise the Department has been carrying out in relation to Hepatitis C and to respond to the points raised. The report "*Hepatitis C and the Heat Treatment of Blood Products for Haemophiliacs in the mid 1980s*" is being published today. A copy of the report is also being placed in SPICe.

The Minister intends to announce that she has concluded from the report that the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service was not negligent in its efforts to remove the risk of contracting hepatitis C from blood products in the 1980s. The Minister has every sympathy with people who are suffering, but she believes it right to acknowledge that medical treatment often involves a balance of risks, not least the necessity of using blood products to protect the lives of haemophiliacs.

The Committee had previously asked the Minister whether she would consider extending the remit of the exercise to include people who had become infected with the Hepatitis C virus through blood transfusions. In her letter of 10 July, the Convener asks for clarification of the Department's reply on the Minister's behalf that she did not intend to extend the exercise.

The Minister undertook this fact-finding exercise in response to specific concerns about an alleged difference in treatment between blood products for haemophiliacs in Scotland and in England. She undertook the fact-finding exercise in order to find out what happened. By contrast, she believes that the general background to infection through HCV through transfusions of whole blood is well known within the scientific and policy-making community:

- the hepatitis C virus was not identified until it was isolated in 1989;
- blood transfusion services in the UK did not test for the virus until 1991 when a reliable test was introduced;
- some people were given blood in the 1970s and 1980s which no-one could know was infected; the blood was as safe as the medical knowledge of the day allowed, and the risks of unknown viruses then as now would have to be weighed against the risks of not receiving the transfusion.

The Minister hopes this will help to clarify matters for the Committee. She has asked me to say that she believes the other questions in the Convener's letter will be answered by the report. For the avoidance of doubt and in response to one of the Convener's questions, she would like the Committee to note that the report contains some background information about hepatitis C, and deals mainly with Factor VIII in accordance with the remit of the exercise, rather than with other blood products or with whole blood.

I hope the Committee find this helpful.

*yours sincerely*

GRO-C

Ian Turner