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Thousands at risk in diseased blood alert

MINISTERS were today considering plans to trace up to 3,000 patients who may be infected with the liver disease hepatitis C, following the deaths of 12 haemophiliacs from contaminated blood supplies.

At least 2,000 more haemophiliacs have already been infected with the virus, which was only wiped out of blood products after it became identifiable in 1991.

There are around 3,000 other patients, not haemophiliacs, who underwent blood transfusions up to 1991 who are known to be at risk. Doctors have warned of the ethical dilemma posed by telling people they may have a disease for which there is no cure.

One-fifth of those infected with hepatitis C, a chronic disease which takes between 20 and 30 years to develop, are expected to have cirrhosis of the liver. A tenth of those will go on to liver failure within five years.

Health Secretary Virginia Bottomley has to decide whether to begin a lengthy process of tracking down patients through hospital records so they can be counselled.

At present there is no vaccine against the disease, only various forms of drug therapy such as Interferon, which works in around a quarter of cases.

A Department of Health spokesman said today: "We are considering the feasibility of a 'look-back' exercise, to trace, treat and counsel those who may be infected."

A spokesman for the Blood Transfusion Service said: "There is no known treatment we can give."

"Telling people they have the virus and that they may become ill in 20 years' time raises some serious questions."

The news of the wide-scale infection of haemophiliacs through supposedly life-saving clotting agents is a terrifying echo of the way the Aids virus was unwittingly transmitted to hundreds of patients in the Eighties. Those cases led to the Government paying out £42 million to the families of patients infected with HIV through an anti-clotting agent. But the Department of Health

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said today that they had no plans to compensate over hepatitis C, as "these patients will have received the best treatment available at the time". All blood donors are now screened for the antibodies that come with the virus, and donations are tested.

In 1985 an anti-viral heat treatment designed to kill infections was introduced for all blood products. But hepatitis C contamination in blood supplies was not completely eradicated until 1991 when screening of blood donors for the antibodies to the virus was introduced.

Doctors believe that up to 85 per cent of haemophiliacs who regularly used the factor before May 1985 have hepatitis C.

The virus itself was only identified in 1989, and before then had only been known as non-A, non-B hepatitis.

Dr Patricia Hewitt, acting medical director of the North London Blood Transfusion Service in Colindale, said: "The people most at risk are those who received most blood, such as haemophiliacs. We believe that less than one per cent of those who gave blood before 1991 were contaminated with the virus."

"If you receive one pint of contaminated blood, it is assumed you are infected. But you would not necessarily become unwell and might never be ill from it."

She said that a national discussion was going on over whether to start tracing all those who had received blood transfusions before 1991.

"It is possible to do, and we have the system in place. But it raises a lot of difficult ethical and resource implications. It is a huge task to identify a small number of people."

"We know from the experience of the HIV cases that telling people they may be infected can cause enormous anxiety."