

Question: to ask Secretary of State what efforts his Department is making to find an effective test to screen for antibodies to the virus which causes Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, and when he expects such a test to be introduced?

Suggested Reply

I am pleased to say that a test will be introduced within the next few months to screen all blood donations for antibodies to the virus which causes AIDS. Arrangements will also be made for Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD) clinics to provide an AIDS test for people who fear they may have been exposed to the disease; this should ensure that no one is tempted to give blood just to obtain a test.

The Government has provided funds of over £57,000 to enable the Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) to carry out a full evaluation of all the test kits which are currently available. A further £750,000 will be provided for PHLS to set up laboratory facilities to confirm the results of any blood donations found positive and to test the samples taken in STD clinics.

A number of test kits are already available and in use abroad but reports from those countries suggest that the tests are not entirely reliable. We believe that no test should be introduced in the U.K. until its reliability has been established; we cannot accept a test which often fails to detect antibodies in blood or detects antibodies where there are none. An evaluation programme is being undertaken by PHLS and National Blood Transfusion Service experts as a matter of urgency. Contrary to reports in today's press no decisions on choice of test kits have yet been made. It is hoped that we will be able to introduce a test within four to five months. We are also making arrangements to offer counselling to anyone whose blood is found to be positive.

We expect ^{that} the number of blood donors found to have antibodies is likely to be very small. The risk of contracting AIDS from a blood transfusion remains extremely small and screening will reduce this risk still further.