

Aids testing to start for two million blood donors

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Aids tests for 2 million blood donors are due to start by September it was disclosed yesterday.

An official announcement by health ministers and the test manufacturer, Wellcome, is expected next month. Other tests made by US companies may also be used.

The tests will cost the transfusion service an estimated £2 million a year. A senior Wellcome source said yesterday that the firm already had enough stocks to meet national demand.

Experts at the Government's infectious disease agency, the Public Health Laboratory Service, meet next week to finalise plans for six regional centres to re-check blood identified as positive by the Wellcome test.

The test, which identifies antibodies to the Aids virus, was developed by Dr Richard Tedder at the Middlesex Hospital, London and Professor Robin Weiss, director of the Institute of Cancer Research.

The presence of antibodies shows that the blood donor has been infected; it does not show that the donor is infectious, or that the donor will develop the disease. The body's immune system may have destroyed the virus, leaving only antibodies. An estimated 10 per cent of people with antibodies develop the disease.

The Wellcome test has been chosen by the Department of Health in preference to US versions by Abbott Laboratories, Electro-Nucleonics, and DuPont, because it is considered to be more accurate and easier to use.

Concern centres on the num-

ber of false positive results. Leading US tests are 99 per cent accurate, but even at that standard between 4,000 and 21,000 British donors would be mistakenly identified as having been infected.

Donors found to be antibody-positive after re-checking will be warned that they risk spreading the infection by sexual intercourse, whether heterosexual or homosexual.

The Department of Health's decision to opt for the Wellcome test follows a warning in the British Medical Journal from the directors of all the UK haemophilia centres that patients needing massive blood transfusions may be running a one in 20 risk of being infected with the Aids virus in some areas.

The number of Aids patients rose by 10 to 169 last month; 78 have died.