

John Reid accused CJD victims' families of money-grabbing 'for all possible claims'

By Eleanor Mayne

SCIENCE CORRESPONDENT

CABINET Minister John Reid has outraged families of vCJD sufferers by accusing them of being money grabbers.

He has said they will 'go for all possible claims' from the fund set up to care for them.

In his extraordinary outburst, Dr Reid also claimed families of those dying from the human form of mad cow disease would move to France if they were told they could claim cash from abroad.

And he likened the relatives to victims of Gulf War syndrome, which he then said simply did not exist - even though last year the MoD was finally forced to accept that it does.

Last night relatives of the dead and dying said Dr Reid remarks recorded four years ago betrayed a total lack of understanding or compassion for the piteous plight of people with vCJD. The later

stages of the disease are widely considered to be one of the most horrific and drawn-out deaths anyone can suffer.

Yet a record of a 2002 meeting between Dr Reid, who was Health Secretary at the time, and the vCJD Trust set up to help victims of the disease and their relatives, shows him as being preoccupied with fears that relatives were somehow attempting to cash in on the scheme.

He said: 'I recognise this from my experience in Northern Ireland. If you set up a scheme like this, all those entitled will go for all possible claims. It is Gulf War victims all over again.'

Dr Reid was supposed to be meeting trustees to find out why legal costs of the main fund and the smaller 'discretionary fund' were so high.

He told trustees: 'The small fund is causing the problem because of the discretion which it gives, encouraging an endless number of claimants. The definitions are a recipe for arguments and costs. One hundred and seventy claimants all with relatives, all told that they will get extra and of course you get everyone claiming for this.'

The Minister then told of his fears that families of victims would find that one man who died overseas had been allowed to claim his compensation from abroad.

Dr Reid said: 'I am concerned that families, once they are aware of such claims, may go to France so as to be able to claim for care... I am concerned that this amendment would increase the number of claims with families intentionally taking people abroad.'

Sir Robert Owen, the chairman of the Trustees, appeared shocked and told Dr Reid: 'I do not feel there have been any such cases of families acting like this.'

But Dr Reid insisted: 'I understand this but am still concerned about the increase in claims once this becomes known.'

Last night, GRO-A of GRO-A; GRO-A; Hertfordshire, who lost his step-daughter; GRO-A; to vCJD in GRO-A; 1997, said he was appalled at the suggestion that any families would attempt to make money out of such terrible suffering.

'I feel extremely bitter,' he said. 'My honesty has been questioned. To even suggest that families would take their

loved ones abroad and claim for it, I find distressing and insulting.'

Last night one of the campaigners for the families, MP Nick Harvey, said: 'Families of vCJD victims will be horrified to think that the whole matter is in the hands of someone quite so unsympathetic as Dr Reid. He suggests claimants are just sort of scroungers. The least he can do is to apologise.'

Yesterday advisers to Dr Reid, who is now Defence Secretary, claimed that the transcript - which was circulated to trustees and to Dr Reid by Sir Robert, a distinguished High court judge - was 'not an accurate record of the meeting'.

Dr Reid's spokesman said that the note had been sent by Sir Robert because there was a disagreement over the record of the meeting. Concerns were not raised over the transcript because 'the official record [of the meeting] stood prior to this note being sent in.'

The meeting in October 2004 had been called in response to concerns over the high costs of managing the vCJD scheme, which by last October had paid out £31.5 million in compensation but nearly a quarter of that amount to firms of lawyers.

Health Department officials had initially resisted involving the Health Secretary in the row at all, suggesting it be handled by a junior minister. Dr Reid was forced to attend, however, after Sir Robert wrote a letter of complaint. But Richard Vallance, senior partner at the vCJD trust's lawyers, Charles Russell, said: 'I prepared the note of that meet-

ing and sent it to the Department of Health. I got no comment or feedback on it. I submitted a note and it was put on the file.

'Sir Robert approved the note before it was submitted.'

The Department of Health appeared to distance itself from its former boss, saying that Dr Reid's comments represented 'his own views rather than that of the Department.'

CASE STUDY

GRO-A and GRO-A whose only child GRO-A is the latest British victim of vCJD; are living with the full horror of the Trust's rigid bureaucracy.

Along with their son-in-law GRO-A GRO-A, 29, they have been asked to prove their grief over the death of their loved one four months ago in order to share in a £5,000 payment for 'psychiatric disorder'.

Now they have been told to map out a family tree for the Trustees so the payment can be divided among all blood relatives.

GRO-A's husband believes the Trust will have to contact more than 100 people - many of whom never met GRO-A - before the £5,000 can be paid.

Meanwhile, an uncle, an aunt and a close cousin have already been told by doctors they are not upset enough to qualify. One of the questions GRO-A's relatives say they were asked was

how many times they had cried. The family claim the bureaucracy and inflexibility of the Trust deed, written by the Department for Health, that regulates the procedures for compensation, has put them under 'terrible stress'.

Mr GRO-A, 64, estimates that, on average, over £40,000 has been spent in legal fees for every application for funds from the Trust. He said: 'At first the fund was fine and we got the initial lump sum. But from then on we have had to fight for every penny. I have received around 50 letters over the claim. Why all this paperwork?'

GRO-A, 30, from GRO-A, Surrey, was diagnosed with the human form of mad cow disease last July. Shortly afterwards the former sales administrator got married so that she could appreciate her big day. GRO-A died on GRO-A, just 12 weeks after her wedding. Her family feel the vCJD Trust added to their grief.

TRAGIC LOSS:

GRO-A and GRO-A on their wedding day. GRO-A died 12 weeks later

GRO-A

