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[Last 7 days](#) | [Archive](#) | [Search](#) | [News Desk](#) | [Help](#)

Thursday 15th August 2002

## **NATIONAL BLOOD SERVICE MAKING FURTHER IMPROVEMENTS TO BLOOD SAFETY**

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Public Health Minister Hazel Blears announced today that the National Blood Service is making further improvements to blood safety. Fresh frozen plasma for new-born babies and young children born after 1st January 1996 will be obtained from the United States as an additional precaution against the theoretical risk of vCJD transmission. This fresh frozen plasma will have a further treatment (methylene blue) to reduce the risk of blood-borne viruses.

Hazel Blears said:

"The safety of blood and blood products used in the NHS is of paramount importance and every reasonable step is taken to minimise any risks during blood transfusion. Although there is no evidence that vCJD has been transmitted through human blood, it is right that we should take this precautionary step to protect those babies and young children born after 1st January 1996 who should not have been exposed to BSE via the food chain.

"On the advice of our experts in this area the National Blood Service will be obtaining fresh frozen plasma for babies and young children from unpaid US donors and using single units rather than pooled plasma. This precaution is in addition to steps that have already been taken to minimise the theoretical risk of vCJD through blood and blood products. These include the removal of white blood cells which evidence suggests may carry the greatest risk of transmitting vCJD, and the importation of plasma from the US for the production of blood products.

"It is never possible to guarantee 100% safety but we will continue to take advice from our expert committees on steps to minimise any risks from blood and blood products."

Fresh frozen plasma is used for instance to treat some patients with blood-clotting problems and supporting some intensive care unit patients. It is also used for premature babies, and babies and children

having heart surgery, liver transplants and after major accidents and injuries.

Notes to the Editors:

1. Fresh Frozen Plasma (FFP) is the fluid in which the red and white blood cells and platelets are suspended and carried around the body. This fluid is separated from donated blood units by centrifugation and frozen. FFP contains clotting factors, antibodies, albumin and minerals.
2. Our current high levels of blood safety are achieved by screening out potential high risk donors and then further testing every unit of donated blood for the presence of bloodborne infections such as HIV, Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C before it is released to hospitals.
3. Pathogen inactivation is based on methylene blue technology. Methylene blue has been administered in medical practice for over 100 years, and in much larger doses than the National Blood Service (NBS) will be using. As part of this new procedure, the NBS will be removing more than 90% of the methylene blue before the plasma is issued to hospitals. The process is designed to kill certain viruses, which can be transmitted by transfusion. It does not affect prions, the agent responsible for vCJD.
4. To minimise any risk of vCJD FFP is produced by the UK blood services using plasma from UK donors which has been leucodepleted to remove the white blood cells (which evidence suggests may carry the greatest risk of transmitting vCJD). Each unit of FFP is made from plasma from a single blood donor. As an additional precaution FFP for neonates and children born after 1 January 1996 (who should not have been exposed to BSE via the food chain) will be obtained from the voluntary, unpaid US blood donor sector. The US FFP will be from single donations from unpaid donors.
5. For further information contact the Department of Health Press Office on 020 7210 5707