GMC/6

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SECURITY

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From the Joint Parliamentary Under Secretary of State

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The Rt Hon Dr David Owen MP

Dear David

16 APR 1985

Thank you for your letter of 23 January to Norman Fowler about the risk of contracting AIDS from transfused blood products. I am sorry for the delay in replying.

We are taking a number of actions currently to minimise this means of transmission. Regional Health Authorities have been supplied with sufficient copies of our revised leaflet "AIDS - important new advice for blood donors" to distribute to each donor on an individual basis. A Health Circular was issued by the Department, in advance of leaflet distribution, clearly setting out this requirement. The revised leaflet extended the 'high risk' groups and again warned all in those groups not to donate blood.

We are of course very conscious of the difficulties faced by people with haemophilia who need treatment with blood products. We are especially aware of the additional pressures which the risk from AIDS must involve for parents of haemophiliac children. It was with the needs of haemophiliacs very much in mind that we decided in 1982 that the UK must become self-sufficient in blood products. We are already self-sufficient in blood.

When we decided to redevelop the Blood Products Laboratory at Elstree to provide the manufacturing capacity for self-sufficiency, we set Regions plasma procurement targets based upon their populations served.

It is for Regions to decide how best to achieve these targets. Options certainly include plasmapheresis programmes, but also new methods of obtaining a higher plasma yield from existing conventional donations of whole blood.

The Department has monitored the progress of all Regions and has written to Regional General Managers asking them to review their policies where progress has not matched expectations. Meanwhile the investment of £35 million at Elstree is continuing, with the project presently on schedule for completion by its original target date of January 1986.

E.R.

Self-sufficiency of itself will not guarantee AIDS free blood products, but we shall then no longer be dependent upon imported Factor VIII produced from pooled plasma given by donors who are paid for their blood.

Even though the risk from a blood transfusion is small we want to reduce it still further. We also wish to safeguard the plasma which is extracted from whole blood, pooled, and made into blood products. We are therefore co-ordinating the evaluation of tests to detect the presence in blood of the antibody to AIDS related virus in order to select which is the best test for use in the NHS. Once a test is in routine use blood, and blood products made in this country, will be much safer.

Meanwhile, steps are being taken to safeguard recipients of Factor VIII by treating the product itself to inactivate AIDS related virus. From April Factor VIII made at Elstree will all be heat treated. In the case of imported commercial Factor VIII, product licences granted under the Medicines Act 1968 are required. We have now granted a number of licences for Factor VIII which cover products which have been heat treated during manufacture.

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THE BARONESS TRUMPINGTON