

Hunt for 3,000 blood 'victims'

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HOSPITAL records are to be trawled to try to trace 3,000 people feared to have contracted hepatitis C through transfusions of contaminated blood, the Department of Health announced yesterday.

More than 6,000 people are estimated to have been infected by transfusions before September 1991, when routine screening of blood donations for the hepatitis C virus was begun. At least one in two is assumed to have died since.

The department is stressing that people who had a blood transfusion before autumn 1991 run a risk of only one in 2,000 of having contracted hepatitis C and that very few even of those infected will need treatment.

Jeremy Metters, deputy chief medical officer for England, said the department was concerned in case family doctors were besieged by worried patients. "There is no need for those who received blood transfusions to take any immediate action."

Ministers have decided to authorise a "look back exercise" involving transfusion records following concern over hepatitis C infection via transfusions and disclosure that 12 men with haemophilia died from the liver disease in 1993.

Previously, the department has argued that it would be technically too difficult to

mount such a tracing operation and that no treatment for the disease was available.

The policy change has been prompted by the success of a pilot exercise, showing it may be possible to trace many of those infected, and by the licensing of a drug - Interferon Alpha 2a - for use in the treatment of hepatitis C.

The tracing exercise will start by identifying former blood donors discovered since 1991 to have been carriers of the disease. Transfusion centres will then check records and inform hospitals which were sent consignments of blood taken from the donors.

The hospitals will seek to establish from their records which patients, if any, received the possibly infected blood and will contact them direct or inform their GPs.

Tom Sackville, junior health minister, said: "We shall do all we can to care for patients who have become infected in this way through counselling, and where appropriate, treatment."

Health officials estimate that 3,000 people infected before 1991 are still alive.

Hepatitis C infection is usually mild in the initial stages. About one in five cases leads to cirrhosis of the liver after 20 years and a few cases lead to liver cancer.

A Haemophilia Society spokesman said the society was not seeking compensation across the board. However, it wanted relief of financial hardship on the same terms as those for people infected with HIV.