

Killer disease alert over gay blood donors

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A PROPAGANDA campaign may be launched in Britain soon to discourage homosexuals from donating blood because of the risk of spreading the mystery disease AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome).

The disease, which kills at least half of those who get it, is thought to be transmittable through blood transfusions, so specialists are demanding closer screening of blood donors.

Homosexuals are considered a high risk group since seven out of 10 of the 1,300 people affected in the United States have been homosexual.

The disease, characterised by a collapse in the body's ability to fight infection, is a medical time-bomb for Britain. Although only 15 cases have been reported since it first crossed the Atlantic in December 1981, many more people could be harbouring it, for the incubation period is up to three years.

Two groups in Britain are particularly worried about its advent: male homosexuals, because of their particular susceptibility, and haemophiliacs because of their regular treatment with a blood product, known as Factor VIII, derived from donated blood.

The Haemophilia Society

has assured callers from among 4,000 sufferers in Britain that only 11 haemophiliacs in the United States have contracted the disease.

One haemophiliac in Cardiff is suspected of having contracted AIDS but a senior doctor said that though the man had received Factor VIII for a number of years no direct link had been established with the blood product.

The patient's symptoms were less serious than those reported among AIDS sufferers in the United States and he was in no danger.

Dr John Craske, a virus specialist at the Withington Hospital, Manchester, said last week that it was necessary to act quickly. 'There could be a serious problem among the homosexual population here in a year's time,' he said.

'We will have to tackle the question of whether homosexuals should donate blood. Gay associations will have to be circularised and have the situation explained. It will probably then be necessary to rely on their altruism.'

Dr Tom Davies, director of the North London Blood Transfusion Service, said that asking people whether they were homosexual was a problem. 'We get Catholic priests coming here to donate blood. Can you imagine what the reaction would be if we were to ask such a question?'

The epidemic spreads, p 27.