

9th June, 1983

Sir Henry Yellowlees,
Chief Medical Officer,
Department of Health and Social Security,
Alexander Fleming House,
Elephant and Castle,
LONDON,
SE1 6BY.

Dear Sir Henry,

1450 by end May

You will have been aware that during recent weeks considerable publicity has been given in the Press to the condition of Acquired Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). This syndrome was first reported in the U.S.A. and since 1981 some 1300 cases have been diagnosed in that country. The patients exhibit an impairment of the immune system which makes them susceptible to certain types of cancer, e.g. kaposi's sarcoma and to opportunistic infections, and the condition carries a high mortality. The syndrome has been found, strikingly, in male homosexuals (75-80 per cent) particularly with those with multiple partners, but it has also affected male and female heterosexuals, of whom 60 per cent admit to intravenous drug abuse. Two different ethnic groups are also involved; Haitians and people from Central Africa (Tehad and Zaire).

The etiology of the disease is not known, but there is a strong possibility that the syndrome is caused by a transmissible infectious agent and in this context it has been implicated in transfusion of blood and blood products. In the U.S.A. several patients suffering from haemophilia-A have contracted AIDS and some have died; all of these patients received repeated infections of Factor VIII concentrate derived from human plasma. In England there is one patient with haemophilia who is suffering from a condition which fulfils the U.S.A. definition of AIDS and there is one other possible patient suffering from haemophilia who may have the syndrome.

Although relatively few cases of AIDS have, as yet, been reported in this country, the significance of the condition with respect to the transfusion of blood and blood products are two-fold.

- (1) To ensure that persons in a high risk group with respect to AIDS are not enrolled as blood donors.

In order to achieve this aim, the Regional Transfusion Directors, with the agreement of Senior Medical Officers at the D.H.S.S. have prepared a pamphlet which gives information to donors on AIDS and asks those persons

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in high-risk groups not to donate blood. Additional questions are to be asked of donors with respect to their health, but it is unanimously agreed that the sexual practices of donors cannot be questioned directly.

- (2) Approximately one-half of the Factor VIII concentrate used in the treatment of haemophilia in England and Wales at present is derived from plasma imported from the U.S.A.

The Press have been keenly interested in this aspect and there is, in my view, no alternative to the continuation of this policy in the short term. As you will appreciate, the commercial companies producing this product in the U.S.A. have been subjected to considerable pressures to produce safe material and since April, 1983, restrictions have been placed on donors in high-risk groups with respect to AIDS, and the importation of the product prepared before April, 1983, is being carefully monitored. In the medium term, the Blood Products Laboratory, Elstree, is being rebuilt so that it will have the capability of preparing blood products at a level which will make this country self-sufficient. The necessity of an adequate supply of plasma from our volunteer donors to the new laboratory from the regional transfusion centres cannot be over-emphasised.

AIDS is not a major problem in this country at present and, frankly, we do not know whether it will be in the future. However, it is being taken seriously in European Countries and the Ministers of the Council of Europe are to be asked to approve recommendations designed to minimize the effect of AIDS. These recommendations are not in general incompatible with the measures being taken in this country.

Although the situation with respect to the transfusion of blood products and the incidence of AIDS has been closely observed by the transfusion service for some time, it has to be admitted that press publicity, albeit some of it ill-informed and alarmist, has resulted in a reconsideration of this problem and the formulation of the policy outlined above.

Since this has occurred since the closure of the agenda for the meeting of the Consultant Advisers on 17th June, 1983, I will be grateful if you will allow me a few minutes under Any Other Business to appraise members of the Committee, of the problems of AIDS in relation to the transfusion of blood and blood products and the measures being undertaken to minimize the effects of this potentially fatal syndrome.

I thank you for your consideration of my request.

Yours sincerely,

H.H. GUNSON,
Director.

c.c. Dr. D. Walford.