

BRIEFING FOR THE PRIME MINISTER: 12TH JUNE 1995

HEPATITIS C

I have great sympathy with those who may have been inadvertently infected with Hepatitis C through NHS treatment.

I hope the hon. member will recognise that the patients concerned received the best treatment available in the light of medical knowledge at the time. Since 1991, when a reliable test became available, all blood donations have been tested for Hepatitis C to prevent such infection.

Arrangements have been made to trace, counsel and - if necessary - treat those who may have been infected through blood transfusions. The Department of Health is also supporting an initiative by the Haemophilia Society to study the best way of supporting those who are infected with the Hepatitis C virus.

Compensation?

What the hon. member is asking for is compensation for patients where, tragic though their circumstances are, no fault and no negligence on the part of the NHS has been proved. The House will understand the significance and implications of such a move. The principle involved is not one which can or should be lightly breached.

Precedent already established by HIV

In the case of patients inadvertently infected with the HIV virus, the decision was taken, in light of the particularly deadly nature of AIDS, that compensation would be appropriate. A number of other countries have reached the same conclusion without extending compensation further. Each issue has to be judged according to its specific features.