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THE PRIME MINISTER

8 May 2007

Dear Mrs.

GRO-A

Thank you for your letter of 7 February about the Skipton Fund and the issue of haemophilia patients infected with contaminated blood products following NHS treatment.

In response to the points that you raise about the Skipton Fund, I can only reiterate what my Ministerial colleagues have said in previous replies. Whilst the Government has great sympathy for the pain and hardship suffered by the widows of those inadvertently infected with hepatitis C, it has always been clear that the ex-gratia payment scheme is for those living with the virus and is not designed to compensate for bereavement.

We also understand why those who were infected with hepatitis C and HIV want to know how it happened and why it could not have been prevented. However, the Government of the day acted in good faith, relying on the information available at the time. We have been open and transparent on this issue, ensuring that as much relevant information is in the public domain as possible, with numerous documents having been released under the Freedom of Information Act.

As you are aware, there is a non-Governmental inquiry underway, which is chaired by Lord Archer of Sandwell. The Department of Health has agreed to meet with Lord Archer's team to identify any assistance which can be provided but is not directly involved in the actual inquiry.

In line with this policy of openness, and to address concerns raised following the return of documents previously considered missing from a firm of private solicitors, the Department is currently reviewing all documents in relation to Non-A, Non-B hepatitis between the period of 1970-1985. The review will consider all documents held by the Department and will report on their content. It intends to issue as many of these documents as possible and expects to complete the report shortly. A copy of the report will be sent to Lord Archer and placed in the library of the House.

On the matter of a public inquiry into the issue of contaminated blood products, as previously stated, the Government does not accept that any wrongful practices were employed and does not consider that a public inquiry is justified. Donor screening for hepatitis C was introduced in the UK in 1991 and the development of this test marked a major advance in microbiological technology, which could not have been implemented before this time.

I hope this reply clarifies the Government's position on these matters.

Yours sincerely,

Mrs GRO-A

GRO-C