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Settlement likely for Aids haemophiliacs

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SIGNS are growing that the Government will agree to an out-of-court settlement before Christmas for haemophiliacs who caught the Aids virus from contaminated National Health Service blood.

The Government faces mounting pressure from Conservative back-benchers and a move by Labour's health spokesman, Harriet Harman, to press for a "no fault" compensation scheme for the patients.

A sum of £50m is being suggested, substantially less than the £75m that the Haemophilia Society says is a minimum.

Any discussions, however, with lawyers representing the 1,200 affected haemophiliacs and their families who are claiming compensation, and any subsequent agreement, is likely to be over the form of a new *ex gratia* payment.

This would avoid, in name, paying compensation that the Department of Health fears would encourage a flood of suits from patients following incidents where no fault or negligence could be proved.

Last week Margaret Thatcher said the Government needed legal clarity before any further payment could be made.

Mark Mildred, of Pannone Napier, one of the solicitors repre-

senting the haemophiliacs, said yesterday that he had had no direct discussions about a settlement with government lawyers.

Michael Latham, the Tory MP for Rutland and Melton, said: "The Government will have to change its mind about this because they will not be able to carry their own troops."

"It will be forced to back down by its own supporters, because it is a simple moral issue." If the Government acted early, he said, the haemophiliacs with Aids or HIV would benefit before some died. The Government would also still get some political credit for its action, rather than appearing to have been forced into it.

Ministers were questioned on the issue twice by their own back-benchers last week, and Labour is understood to be considering raising the issue when it next gets an opposition day debate in the Commons, after the Queen's Speech.

David Watters, secretary of the Haemophilia Society, said that the machinery to make new payments already existed in the MacFarlane Trust, established to handle £34m the Government has paid to in-

fect haemophiliacs. They have received £20,000 each to help with the costs of the illnesses, but that is less than a court would be likely to award if it found in their favour. Another £10m is invested by the trust to help families with special needs.

Mr Watters said the society would resist any new money being tied to special needs. "If new payments are to be made then it must be up to individuals to decide how to spend the money," he said.

■ Plasma infusions rich in Aids antibodies given to 10 patients at different stages of Aids infection appear to have cleared the virus from their blood.

Patients with Aids and Aids Related Complex (ARC) were given monthly infusions containing high levels of Aids-specific antibodies collected from people with HIV infection. After 17 months, five of the six Aids patients had died but those with ARC remained well, with no new symptoms. The infusions maintained their levels of protective antibodies against the virus.

Dr Abraham Karpas, writing in *Proceedings of the American National Academy of Sciences*, said the treatment might delay the onset of full-blown Aids if started early.