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AIDS: Incidence and Control

Baroness Dudley: My Lords, I beg leave to ask the Question standing in my name on the Order Paper.

The Question was as follows:

To ask Her Majesty's Government how widespread is the disease AIDS in the United Kingdom and Europe, and what steps are being taken to prevent it spreading in the community.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Health and Social Security (**Lord Glenarthur**): My Lords, 14 confirmed cases of AIDS have been reported to the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre at Colindale, and a further two cases are under investigation. On the basis of the information available to us there are some 60 cases within other member states of the Council of Europe.

The Medical Research Council has established a working party and co-ordinate research into the disease. The Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre is operating a national surveillance system, which includes making available a summary of information for doctors about the incidence, identification and methods of control of the disease. Although there is no conclusive evidence that AIDS is transmitted by blood or blood products, the department is considering the publication of a leaflet indicating the circumstances in which blood donations should be avoided.

Baroness Dudley: My Lords, I thank the Minister for that Answer. Can he tell me whether there is a cure on the way?

Lord Glenarthur: My Lords, up to the moment it has not proved possible to identify exactly what is causing the disease. Until that has happened, I am afraid I could not say that we can produce a cure.

Baroness Gardner of Parkes: My Lords, will the Minister tell me whether any special action is being taken to inform dental and medical practitioners of precautions that they should take? I understand that it is quite possible that a carrier could come into a surgery and that the dentist, the doctor or another patient could become infected.

Lord Glenarthur: My Lords, I do not know the answer concerning dental surgeons specifically, but the mechanisms by which the disease is transmitted, and the causative agent, as I have described to the noble Baroness, are not known. Although promiscuous male homosexual activity and intravenous drug abuse are risk factors, there is no evidence that the disease can be transmitted through non-physical contact.

Baroness Masham of Ilton: My Lords, may I ask the noble Lord why we import blood compounds from America; and is there not a fear that this condition can be transmitted through anti-haemophilic cryo precipitate, which is a blood compound?

Lord Glenarthur: My Lords, I do not know the answer concerning the chemical to which the noble Baroness referred. I shall find out and let her know. We have to import Factor VIII, which is an agent used in the cure for haemophiliacs. We shall need to continue to do that until we are self-sufficient ourselves.

Baroness Gardner of Parkes: My Lords, I thank the Minister for his earlier reply, but may I ask him whether it is now believed that this disease is transmissible in many more ways than originally believed? Will the Minister issue instructions to practitioners, or ask his department to look into the need to do so?

Lord Glenarthur: Yes, my Lords, I will do that.

Baroness Masham of Ilton: My Lords, may I ask the Minister whether he will be good enough to answer the first part of my supplementary question, which was why we have to import blood compounds from America and why we cannot manufacture our own?

Lord Glenarthur: My Lords, we need to import it because we have not got enough ourselves. We are trying to build up our own stocks. The noble Baroness might like to know that last year the Blood Products Laboratory manufactured 22 million international units of Factor VIII. At the same time, we imported 35 million international units in 1981 at a cost of between £3 million and £4 million.