

# The Guardian

age among the flowers laid outside St Andrew's church in Soham yesterday Photograph: Toby Melville/PA

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## Owen demands inquiry into infected blood scandal

**James Meikle**  
Health correspondent

Lord Owen, who was a Labour health minister from 1974 to 1976, has alleged that maladministration by his former department contributed to the scandal in which thousands of patients became infected by contaminated blood products in the 1970s and 80s.

He wants an inquiry into how a promise he made that Britain would be self-sufficient in supplies of clotting factors was not fulfilled and says the government must compensate thousands of people suffering from haemophilia believed to be infected with hepatitis C.

The former SDP leader, who has asked the health service ombudsman for England to investigate, told the Guardian: "The basic justice and fairness of this is so strong the government will have to crack."

The then Dr David Owen told the House of Commons in January 1975 that he wanted the NHS to be "self-sufficient as soon as practicable" in the production of blood clotting factors to "stop us being dependent on imports". He says now that he did not spell out worries about contamination, particularly of blood from paid donors in countries such as the US, because he could not undermine public confidence.

Lord Owen's intervention comes as activist groups representing haemophiliacs and hepatitis C sufferers appeal to

the police to consider a criminal prosecution of British governments over the past 30 years. Terence Grange, chief constable of Dyfed-Powys, acting on behalf of the Association of Chief Police Officers, has told one group, Haemophilia North, that he is contacting the crown prosecution service "with a view to seeking clarification as to the issues we must consider prior to considering any investigation".

At least 2,800 haemophiliacs are thought to be infected with hepatitis C, and the national Haemophilia Society has demanded a £522m 10-year compensation deal.

The Department of Health said yesterday that "initial checks" on departmental papers revealed £500,000 had been spent trying to achieve self-sufficiency but this had not been enough to meet demand: "Ministers have asked that all the papers from that period are looked at. These findings will be shared with Lord Owen."

Treatment for viruses was introduced as soon as the technology was available in the mid-1980s, according to the department, although a test for hepatitis C in donated blood was not available until 1991.

Lord Owen first complained on behalf of a constituent to the ombudsman's predecessor, the parliamentary commissioner for administration, in 1988. He was then MP for Plymouth Devonport. He said health officials should have

admitted to subsequent ministers that the target of self-sufficiency could not be met without more money. But the commissioner would not investigate, saying that parliamentary answers Dr Owen had given in 1975 did not suggest the risk of contamination had been a major factor.

Lord Owen said that in 1988 he had been unable to give evidence of his personal view that the source of donors was unreliable because his private office papers had "for some inexplicable reason been pulped". But the decision for self-sufficiency was never made only to save money.

People who caught HIV through contaminated blood products were compensated. Lord Owen said it was no excuse that hepatitis C, which over several years can cause serious liver damage and cancer, was not a known infection when he made the promise.

"They did not know at the time about HIV," he said. "It just seems to me too mean for words. You knew that virus illnesses could not be picked up in tests and they might therefore still contaminate. I am not arguing a conspiracy. I tend to favour the foul-up theory of life."

He wants a no-fault compensation scheme. "I have no wish to go to court, but I have no doubt whatsoever that if someone starts to take serious legal action, the government hasn't got a leg to stand on."

Front Page Aug 19, 2002