

The Mail on Sunday

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Messrs Hampsons,
Solicitors,
32 Henrietta Street,
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Dear Sirs,

Further to my letter of February 18 in response to your complaint to the Press Council, I have now considered your letter of February 5 in more detail. I hope you will agree there is little point in bankrupting your client by forever continuing this exchange of lengthy letters about our differences.

Indeed, I have to ask you whether we are really so far apart? Compare our original article with that of your client in The Times on October 9 1987, when he said that the decision taken in the 1970s to import Factor VIII rather than rapidly expand the service in Britain has cost this country dearly in both human and economic terms.

He went on to write: "In 1982 it became clear that the HIV virus could be transmitted by blood...". Our report, in May 1983, revealed this fact to the public at large for the first time. We were issuing a general warning, and calling for urgent action.

Dr Jones wrote in The Times that the plant at Elstree to produce Factor VIII was due to open this year - 12 years after the then Health Secretary had announced that Britain would be self-sufficient in Factor VIII within 12 months (not years!).

Does Dr Jones not now concede that had our warning been heeded, had the public been outraged by the appalling position haemophiliacs found themselves in in 1983, that we would still be waiting for the Elstree plant to open, 11 years late?

You say that because an investigation was underway in 1983 our article made no difference. We say that had not the medical establishment and interested doctors and experts not issued bland statements saying our article was "no cause for panic" and that the "evidence was too slight for action" that more, many more investigations could, and should, have taken place at that time. Our report could, and should, have made a difference, but for the indifference of the authorities.

Both you and your client, have had enough experience of newspapers to know how frequently matters of great moment can be swept under the carpet, almost totally ignored, simply because of the attitude adopted at critical times by the authorities, and in turn, by other newspapers.

We have never shied away from the fact that we set out to be alarmist in that original article. We knew in the many weeks that we researched the story that it was to be the most important article The Mail on Sunday had ever published. We knew we had the chance to help save people's lives. We knew too how our rival newspapers were likely to react.

There is nothing easier for a specialist writer on a rival newspaper than to rubbish his opponent's exclusive story. There is nothing easier than to quote an anonymous "authority" the next day as saying "no cause for panic". The writer does not feel guilty for having missed the story himself, the newspaper takes delight in knocking down a rival's scoop.

We accept, of course, that several months elapsed between Dr Jones's complaint and the Press Council ruling. But it is being too simplistic to suggest that this meant his action had nothing to do with our report being stifled. Dr Jones was one of the experts at the very heart of the matter at the time, yet he adopted a negative attitude towards us rather than a positive one. It is still a mystery to us that he appeared unable to see that we were wanting to save lives just as much as he was - and we believe that if we had had his co-operation rather than his attack on us that we would have saved lives.

If we could turn back the clock, and in the light of what we know today, would he have acted in the same way, saying our report was highly exaggerated and causing needless distress?

That original article generated one of the heaviest postbag from readers that this newspaper has ever received. Not from angry or alarmed haemophiliacs, but largely from grassroot doctors and nurses on their way up the medical ladder. They wanted to congratulate us for speaking out, for rattling the chains around the solid doors of the establishment.

They knew a national emergency was looming. They knew our warning was needed, that it was the springboard for action. If our article had not been unnecessarily discredited would we be wringing our hands over AIDS and all its tragedies today ?

We will not flinch from continuing to sound warnings, from being alarmist. This country needs more articles written by Dr Jones, it needs more to be published by The Mail on Sunday. But how devastating that we will be reporting tragedies, when, if our first warnings had been heeded, we could have been publishing stories of hope and achievement. We know, as does your client, that it could have been so different.

Yours faithfully,

GRO-C

JIM ANDERSON
Managing Editor