

Ref: PJ/LM

6th May, 1983

The Press Council,
1 Salisbury Square,
LONDON.

Dear Sirs,

Re: The Mail on Sunday, 1st May, 1983

Under the tag "Exclusive: virus imported from US" this edition of The Mail carried a major, front page headline "Hospitals using killer blood" and an article by Susan Douglas, Medical Correspondent. As an experienced doctor deeply concerned with the care of patients requiring blood transfusion, and in particular families with haemophilia, I take the gravest possible exception to this approach to reporting about illness. This sensational and highly exaggerated article has, not unnaturally, started a chain reaction involving other newspapers and radio and television, not only in this country but abroad. As a result, this Haemophilia Centre and others throughout the country have been inundated with calls from worried families.

I have no objection whatsoever to the press taking an interest in health and in objective reporting of disease and its causes. However, the Mail article is neither objective nor accurate.

- The word "virus" is used but there is no proof that a virus even exists as a cause of the acquired immune deficiency syndrome.
- Even if a transmissible agent is eventually proven there is no proof that it has been imported from the US.
- The use of the words "killer blood" is indefensible and needs no further comment from me.
- Within the article itself is the statement that "two men in hospital in London and Cardiff are suspected to be suffering from a sexually-transmitted killer disease after routine transfusions for haemophilia". At the time the article was written, this statement was untrue.
- Within the article it is stated that contaminated blood is being imported. This is unproven.
- Within the article there is a statement that millions of patients requiring major surgery after road accidents and severe burns are given treatment with blood imported from America. This is untrue.
- Within the article it is stated that Directors of Britain's Blood Transfusion Centres and the 110 haemophilic clinics have called emergency meetings to discuss immediate action. At the time the article was written, this was untrue.

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- Within the article suggestions are made that "clean" plasma could be obtained from Switzerland. Not only is this a gross over-simplification of a very difficult problem of supply, but there is no evidence whatsoever that plasma obtained from a country like Switzerland, or indeed the United Kingdom, would be any "cleaner" than that from the United States.

The Mail's article has caused needless distress and suffering to countless people, but especially to families with haemophilia within the United Kingdom, and I would be grateful if this formal complaint could be examined by the Council.

Yours faithfully,

PETER JONES, MD, FRCP, DCH
Director