

CONFIDENTIAL

THE PRESS COUNCIL

PART II

Complaint U10098/D3101

JONES against THE MAIL ON SUNDAY

II.1 The complaint was represented to the editor on 25 Nov 83 and a reminder was sent on 3 Jan 84.

II.2 Mr George Woodhouse, managing editor of THE MAIL ON SUNDAY, responded on 12 Jan 84:

(1) The basis of Mr Jones's complaint is that THE MAIL ON SUNDAY published an inaccurate and highly exaggerated story causing needless distress and suffering, especially to haemophiliacs.

(2) The subject of AIDS and blood donation is one that has been exercising the minds of the medical profession in Britain, the United States and many other countries for a very long time. I believe that when we ran the article we were absolutely right to bring to the attention of all concerned many of the thoughts that were currently occupying those medical experts. Certainly in the previous week there had been a very detailed TV programme on the subject.

(3) I would like to submit a copy of a press release from the department of Health and Social Security which was first issued on 1 Sep 83 entitled "AIDS and Blood Donation" (Para II.4) I believe that this sets out in concise and straightforward detail many of the points that we were highlighting in our article of 1 May. It refers particularly to the question of whether AIDS can be transmitted by transfusion of blood and blood products and gives the answer that this is almost certainly the case, though there is only a remote chance of it happening with ordinary blood transfusions in hospital.

(4) However, in the United States a very small number of patients suffering from haemophilia have developed AIDS. Haemophiliacs are more susceptible to AIDS because they need regular injections of a product called Factor 8. This is made from plasma obtained from many donors. Should just one of the donors be suffering from AIDS, the Factor 8 could transmit the disease.

(5) While I highlight that particular area, I believe that the whole of the Press Release should be read and all the points taken in context.

(6) I also submit a story written in The Doctor of 1 Dec 83 (para II.5) and a letter to The Lancet written by two doctors at Bristol General Hospital (para II.6) in connection with a haemophilia patient who died there and was suffering from AIDS. Their comments as to how the disease was contracted are, I believe, extremely relevant in that they refer specifically to the patient having been given Factor 8 from the United States 18 months ago and from that time on progressively developing symptoms of all which were associated with AIDS.

(7) I prefer to let the DHSS press release and the article in The Doctor and The Lancet speak for themselves. I would merely add that in all this matter, I think THE MAIL ON SUNDAY has acted fairly and responsibly in all its dealings. It is our intention to bring to the notice of the public the dangers of AIDS and the risks that may be run by haemophiliacs. What we said in May has been vindicated.

(8) In my letters to Mr Jones, I made two offers to him to submit a letter for publication in the paper in which he would have had a chance to give his point of view. He rejected both. I pointed out also that we had carried a letter from the Haemophilia Society, which had been agreed with the Society, and which followed very closely after our story had been written.

(9) Mr Jones has persistently contacted me as the Northern Director of the Haemophilia Service. But I see from your correspondence that he claims now that he is not acting for the Society but complaining on behalf of his staff and patients.

II.3 The editor, Mr Stewart Steven, states:

patients
(1) It is evident that Mr Jones's complaint is that THE MAIL ON SUNDAY caused distress and suffering to the workers in the field. I can well understand that this could be the case. I can also understand that Mr Jones and fellow workers should feel that it is in their interest to keep from their patients the very genuine concern felt by researchers about the risk of AIDS being contracted through infusion of blood products.

(2) The fact is that anyone who has ever been in hospital knows that the medical profession has a vested interest in keeping their patients in absolute ignorance. Doctors and other workers in the field of medicine may well believe that this is justified. We do not. It is our contention that it is one of the primary functions of journalism to inform people of facts, however disquieting, of which they were previously ignorant. We are well aware that patients requiring blood transfusions, particularly haemophiliacs, were disturbed by these articles and demanded information from their doctors as a result of them.

(3) Sometimes, as I understand, they did so intemperately. This is unfortunate but hardly surprising.

(4) We would claim that ever since these articles appeared there have been cases of patients dying from AIDS which researchers believe could have been contracted via their transfusions and no case of patients dying because they refused a transfusion. In other words, our articles caused discomfort to the medical profession and not the patients. The hysteria evinced by Mr Peter Jones is such that the impression is given that it is THE MAIL ON SUNDAY rather than AIDS which is the mysterious killer virus.

(5) We will maintain and will always maintain that this article and articles which followed in other newspapers created exactly that sense of emergency which was hitherto lacking in the government and indeed in the Haemophilia Society itself, a splendid

organisation no doubt, but one as addicted to bureaucratic sloth as any other. It should, in this respect, be realised that organisations such as the Haemophilia society, though independent have, in fact, a parasitical relationship with the medical profession as a whole, the Department of Health, etc. This is quite normal and is in the nature of all such organisations. It does, however, behove those who deal with them to bear this in mind.

(6) THE MAIL ON SUNDAY believes, in short, that this splendid series of articles were an important contribution to the understanding of a terrible malady which required immediate action of the government to start putting right.

(7) We are proud of what we did and will not permit ourselves to be harassed by those who object to others entering into territory which they feel to be their own, especially if we believe that the care they claim they give is a matter which needs some examination.

II.4 The DHSS circular and leaflet are reproduced below:

The Department of Health and Social Security has today published a leaflet - "AIDS and how it concerns Blood Donors". It has been produced in co-operation with Regional Blood Transfusion Directors.

Announcing publication, Kenneth Clarke, Minister for Health said:

"It has been suggested that AIDS may be transmitted in blood or blood products. There is no conclusive proof that this is so. Nevertheless I can well appreciate the concern that this suggestion may cause. We must continue to minimise any possible risk of transmission of the disease by blood donation but it is not possible to test a person's blood for the presence of AIDS. The best measure which can be taken at the present time is to ask people who think they may have AIDS or be at risk from it, to refrain from giving blood. This is what this leaflet sets out to do."

The Council of Europe has recommended that all member states should make information on AIDS available to blood donors. There is no question of donors being asked about their sexual lives at blood donation sessions or at any other time.

NOTE TO EDITORS

Half the Factor VIII used for the treatment of haemophilia in this country is produced here and the remainder imported from the USA. The US Food and Drug Administration have introduced special requirements for plasma collection which are designed to exclude donors from high risk groups from plasma donation. The Government is committed to making Britain self-sufficient in blood products - the National Blood Transfusion Service already meets demands for whole blood - and is redeveloping the Blood Products Laboratory at Elstree over the next 3 years.

Recently there has been considerable publicity in the newspapers and on radio and television about a new, serious, but rare disease called AIDS.

Since AIDS may be transmitted by transfusion of blood and blood products, the National Blood Transfusion Service wants blood donors to have the facts about the disease.

What is AIDS?

AIDS is short for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. As its name implies, AIDS destroys the body's immune system which normally protects against infections and other illnesses. A person with the disease is therefore at risk of developing serious infections such as pneumonia, or even cancer. AIDS is probably caused by a virus, but this is not known for certain.

Who is at risk from AIDS?

Most of the information about AIDS has come from the USA where approximately 1,500 patients have been found to be suffering from the disease, up to the middle of 1983. Certain groups of people appear to be particularly susceptible; these are:

1. Homosexual men who have many different partners.
2. Drug addicts, male and female, using injections.
3. Sexual contacts of people suffering from AIDS.

It has also been found in a number of immigrants to the USA from the island of Haiti.

Patients with AIDS also seem more likely to have suffered, at some time, from various other diseases such as hepatitis B, syphilis or other sexually transmitted diseases.

Has AIDS occurred in the United Kingdom?

Yes, about a dozen cases have been reported, by the middle of 1983. No-one knows whether more people in the United Kingdom will develop AIDS and a careful watch is being kept for possible cases.

Can AIDS be transmitted by transfusion of blood and blood products?

Almost certainly yes, but there is only the most remote chance of this happening with ordinary blood transfusions given in hospital. However, in the USA a very small number of patients suffering from haemophilia, an illness in which the blood will not have developed AIDS. Haemophiliacs are more susceptible to AIDS because they need regular injections of a product called Factor VIII. This is made from plasma obtained from many donors. Should just one of the donors be suffering from AIDS, then the Factor VIII could transmit the disease.

How can the risks be reduced?

At present, there is no screening test the Transfusion Service can use to detect people with AIDS. So, until there is and until more is known about this disease, donors are asked not to give blood if they think they may either have the disease or be at risk from it.

Will donors be questioned on sexual matters when they attend to give blood?

Definitely not.

The National Blood Transfusion Service has a very high regard for donors as extremely responsible people who give blood for the benefit of others and is confident that they would not knowingly put patients at risk from such a serious disease.

Where can donors obtain further information on AIDS?

Donors can discuss in confidence whether to give blood, with the doctor on the blood collection session, their own doctor or the Director of their local Blood Transfusion Centre.

Please remember, AIDS is a rare disease but a serious one.