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19/08/02

Dear Mrs GRO-A

Thank you for your letters to Alan Milburn, John Prescott, Hazel Blears and the Prime Minister concerning the Haemophilia Society's Carpet of Lilies Campaign. The letters have been sent to me for reply and I am sorry for the very long delay in responding to your query.

I was sorry to hear that your father suffers from haemophilia and has contracted hepatitis C through contaminated blood. The Government takes the issue of those people who have suffered through contaminated blood products very seriously, and has great sympathy for anyone who has suffered harm as a result of NHS treatment.

The Haemophilia Society's campaign calls for recombinant (synthetic) clotting factors (RFs) for all people with haemophilia. In 1998 all health authorities and NHS Trusts in England were asked to provide RFs for new haemophilia patients and children under 16. Those children who first received RFs at 16 are now reaching age 20 and continue to be entitled to receive the product. The Government is considering extending the provision of recombinant clotting factors to all haemophilia patients in England.

The campaign also asks for a public inquiry into this issue. The facts have been set out clearly on many occasions through debates in both Houses, at meetings with Department of Health Ministers and in correspondence. Whilst the Government has great sympathy for those infected with hepatitis C and has considered the call for a public inquiry very carefully, all the information is in the public domain and we do not think it is the way forward.

The campaign also asks for a compensation scheme. Our understanding is that during the 1970s and 1980s, before clotting factors were virally inactivated little was known about hepatitis C. Although it was known as "non A, non B" hepatitis, it was not specifically identified as hepatitis C until 1989.

The technology to make blood clotting products free from hepatitis C in sufficient quantities to treat people with haemophilia in the UK was not possible until the mid 1980s and it was not until 1987 that there was positive proof of means of eliminating the virus. As soon as the technology became available to make blood products free from hepatitis C, the NHS introduced it. There is no legal liability to justify compensation for people with haemophilia and hepatitis C.

The Government's policy remains that compensation or other financial help to patients is given only when the NHS has been at fault. Ministers do not believe that an exception should be made to that general rule in the case of people infected with hepatitis C.

We accept that those infected with hepatitis C do face difficulties, as do other NHS patients and groups of people who unfortunately suffered unforeseen harm which could not have been avoided. We aim to support those with haemophilia infected with hepatitis C through the benefits system, where appropriate, and through the excellent support the Haemophilia Society provides to its members. The Society is currently in receipt of financial assistance from the Department to support its core functions and we periodically support individual projects, for example last year we funded a seminar for clinicians and others to understand better those haemophilia patients who are co-infected with HIV and hepatitis C. Officials meet with the Society on a regular basis and ministers recently met the Society and the All Party Group on Haemophilia to discuss current concerns.

Yours sincerely,

GRO-C

Margaret Ghlaimi
Blood Policy Unit

APPENDIX I/6

[Amndt.5]