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DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Press release

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Thursday 6th November 1997

**SEAC ADVICE ON SAFETY OF BLOOD AND BLOOD PRODUCTS
ACCEPTED**

Health Secretary Frank Dobson announced today that he had accepted advice from the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) on possible precautionary steps to protect recipients of blood and blood products from any possible risk of contracting new variant CJD (nvCJD).

Mr Dobson, said:

"The Government will continue to take whatever scientifically necessary action is practicable to protect the public from any risk of contracting nvCJD.

"The Government accepts the advice it has received from SEAC and the MSBT and I have therefore asked the Department's Director of Research and Development, Professor Swales, to commission an assessment of the risks of human to human transmission of nvCJD through blood and blood products. Meantime, I have instructed the National Blood Authority (NBA) to start work towards the possible extension of leucodepletion of blood in order that they are prepared in the event that the risk assessment indicates that this would be a sensible precautionary measure."

The Government will publish the results of the risk assessment and their response as soon as they are available.

Mr Dobson added:

"These are purely precautionary measures. No-one who needs treatment with blood or blood products should have any hesitation about accepting it; any risk of nvCJD will be far outweighed by the risks of damaging health through not doing so.

"Blood donors are not at any risk. The gift of blood is a very precious one which is invaluable to the health service and to the health of patients."

[MORE]

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SEAC's advice was also considered by the Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Blood and Tissues (MSBT) and the Government has taken account of their views in its response.

A copy of the advice received from SEAC is attached.

In line with the recommendations of the review of SEAC published in September 1997, a summary of the SEAC meeting held on 24 October 1997 is also published today. This is the first SEAC Meeting Public Summary.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

1. Enquiries to Lindsey French DH Press Office GRO-C
2. The Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service (SNBTS) is responsible for blood transfusion services in Scotland. The Scottish Office has confirmed that the SNBTS will be taking the same action as the National Blood Authority in England.

[MORE]

SPONGIFORM ENCEPHALOPATHY COMMITTEE - ADVICE TO MINISTERS

HUMAN BLOOD AND BLOOD PRODUCTS

The Committee have recently concluded that the transmissible agent of nvCJD is indistinguishable from that of BSE but distinctly different from any of the forms of classical CJD. Recent research (some unpublished) suggests that the pathogenesis of nvCJD differs from that of classical CJD and the former may have more involvement of lymphoreticular tissues possibly involving circulating lymphocytes. Therefore it is logical to seek to minimise any risk from blood or blood products by reducing the number of lymphocytes present.

SEAC recommends that the Government should consider a precautionary policy of extending the use of leucodepleted blood and blood products as far as is practicable. It will be for the National Blood Authority to devise a strategy to implement such a policy. It will take time to achieve full implementation and SEAC recommends that planning begins soon while the risk assessments suggested below are carried out.

It is not possible at present to estimate accurately the risk of transmitting nvCJD by blood transfusion. The magnitude of the risk will depend, *inter alia*, on the number of blood donors who are incubating nvCJD and this is not known. However, SEAC recommends that risk assessments, making assumptions of various possible incidences of nvCJD, be carried out to inform decisions on any measures which may be necessary to protect recipients.

BEEF

SEAC reviewed the safety of beef in the light of its discussion on human blood and blood products. Transmission experiments in mice have not found infectivity in the spleen, tonsil, lymph nodes or white blood cells of BSE infected cattle.

The Committee conclude, therefore, that no further measures governing beef and beef products for human consumption, are necessary.

[ENDS]