



The Beechgrove PCV Campaign Update

DYING MAN FIGHTS A GREAT BETRAYAL

Exclusive By Louella Houldercroft Health Correspondent

A HAEMOPHILIAC who watched his brother die of Aids is to take legal action against the Government.

The father of one, who wishes not to be named, is the first person in the country to be granted legal aid for such an action. He wants to fight a waiver included in a 1990 compensation deal signed by haemophiliacs infected with HIV. The waiver prevented them from making future claims for any other blood-borne viruses they may contract through being given transfused blood.

Now The Journal can reveal the Government was already aware of a number of deaths among haemophiliacs from hepatitis C before the waiver was introduced. And although a test for hepatitis C was used in Europe from the late 1980s, it was not introduced in Britain until 1991.

The Newcastle sufferer, who is dying from both HIV and hepatitis C, said yesterday a public inquiry into why infected blood was allowed to be used in Britain was vital to get justice for the thousands of people who had become infected.

"At the time blood transfusions were seen as a lifeline for haemophiliacs," he said.

"Instead, we have been poisoned and now there are only a handful of us left.

"I have watched my brother and 76 friends die over the past 20 years and now I think it is time they finally told us the truth of what went wrong."

Since the mid-1980s, hepatitis C and HIV have killed twice as many people as haemophilia ever did. One of the main criticisms from sufferers is that blood was being shipped in from America where the risk of such viruses are high. In 1996, in a letter to Newcastle MP Jim Cousins, then Conservative health minister John Horam admitted: "At the time of the HIV haemophilia settlement it was known that in some cases non-A non-B hepatitis, as hepatitis C was then known, could lead to serious liver disease and some deaths had already occurred in UK haemophilia patients.

"It is true that haemophilia patients infected with HIV, who accepted payment under the Government's scheme, were required to give an undertaking not to bring any proceedings at any time against the Health Department, health authorities or any other body involving any allegations about matters of policy or operational concern concerning the spread of hepatitis viruses

through blood or blood products."

Current health minister Lord Hunt, writing to Mr Cousins this week, states: "Although it was known that there was an element of risk from viruses, the balance was in favour of the blood products and their perceived benefits."

He also admits a screening test for hepatitis C was available from the 1980s although it was not introduced in the UK until 1991. Mr Cousins said last night: "What is clear is that one party had access to far more information than the other. There seems little doubt the Government's experts had knowledge that there were other viruses in the blood products and the question that

has to be asked is whether the waiver was introduced as a safeguard against possible further legal action. "In hindsight, I think it probably was." The letter from Lord Hunt also states some of the UK's blood laboratories "did not meet required standards". Mr Cousins said: "This is quite a serious admission from the Government."

In the North-East, 95 out of 105 haemophiliacs became infected with HIV and hepatitis C. Of these, just 18 are still alive. Public inquiries into the spread of hepatitis C among haemophiliacs are under way in Canada and the Republic of Ireland where victims have received substantial payouts. Dr Harash Narang, a virologist at Newcastle's General hospital during the 1980s, said he was asked in 1985 to find a way of destroying the hepatitis C and HIV viruses without destroying the blood itself, so it could be used for transfusions.

"It was impossible to do because of the temperature that was needed," he said.

"What was so dreadfully wrong at the time was that the risks of infection were known for many years and yet this information was never communicated to the patients.

"Even now, no-one will accept responsibility for what has happened."

Last night a spokesman for the Department of Health said: "We have great sympathy for the people affected. "The issue is that many people over the years have suffered as a consequence of medical treatment that was intended to improve their condition. "The decision to compensate haemophiliacs who contracted HIV was made by the last Government as a special one-off payment and it was not intended to set a precedent.

"At the time of the settlement in 1990 there was much more knowledge about blood products than had been made public. "And there was other knowledge about viruses that had affected the haemophiliac community.

"But this information and knowledge was developmental."



BLOOD "TAKEN FROM JAILS"

Robert B Tant, Jr. - 'Bud' - was sent to prison in December, 1980, for robbing a bank and shooting at a police officer. Last year he died a killer, after litres of his hepatitis C-infected plasma was used to treat innocent people across the world. Health Correspondent Louella Houldcroft reports.

LINDA Miller will never forget the day her little brother died. For 14 hours she and her sister, Sue, sat wit Bud while he literally bled to death after 20 years of battling against hepatitis C.

Today, the 50-year-old from Washington, a prison care worker who has dedicated the rest of her life to exposing the horrors of the Arkansas prison system, says she cannot bear the thought that innocent people across the world will now suffer the same fate as her brother.

"Bud did some bad things and he went to prison to pay for them," says Linda. "But they turned him into a killer-by-proxy when they took his blood and used it to treat haemophiliacs across the world. "I can't understand how it was allowed to happen and why no-one will accept responsibility for something so terrible. "People are dying because of a treatment that was supposed to save their lives. It's horrific." Bud was a promising boy, a little league star at the age of 10, a Pony League Star in his teens and then signing up to the Marine Corps at the age of 19.

Linda says it was when he became involved in drugs that his life took a downhill turn and in 1980 he robbed a bank to fund his habit. "It was so obvious to everyone that he was ill," says Linda. "Not only was he a drug addict but he was also yellow, the first sign of hepatitis or some similar blood disorder. "And yet they continued to harvest plasma from him to make the Factors VIII and IX for haemophiliacs."

During the 70s and 80s blood was big business as transfusions became gradually more important for treating disease.

It was as early as 1974 that the World Health Organisation warned Governments about taking blood products from "at risk" groups. In its report it states that: "Countries with a low incidence of hepatitis such as the UK should not use whole blood or blood products obtained from source material collected from an area in which there is a high incidence of the disease."

Britain continued to import blood products from the USA from companies that were harvesting plasma from prisoners in notorious institutions such as Cummins State Prison, Arizona State Prison and the Correctional Institution at Raiford.

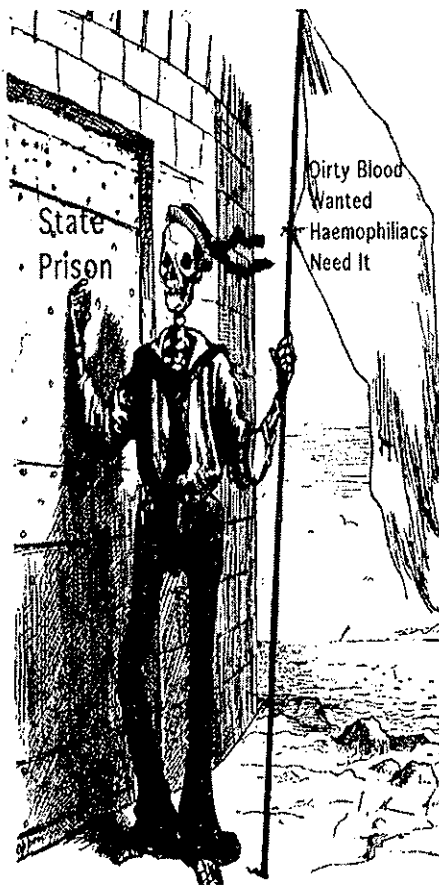
In Canada and Ireland, public inquiries are already underway into how haemophiliacs contracted hepatitis C through transfusion. Earlier this year the inquiries revealed that in Arkansas, "thousands of units were harvested weekly under the prison plasma programme". This particular programme continued to run until 1994. All records of the programme were destroyed when the unit was fire-bombed in May last year. On the same night, the headquarters of the Haemophilia Society in London were burgled. Only the hepatitis C records were stolen. A criminal investigation has also been launched in Canada to determine the extent to which the blood companies knew of the contamination risks and the links with American prisons. Bud's case has been included in the report. A case involving haemophiliacs infected with hepatitis C is currently going through the European courts and an answer is expected later in the autumn. In a statement to the Food and Drug Administration last year, Jack Ryan, president of Cutter Biological - just one of the companies which supplied blood to Britain and now being investigated for their links with prison donors - testified that "from 1979 to 1981, Cutter used prison plasma to manufacture Factor VIII". And in his statement to the Canadian tribunal, Michael Galster, chief medical officer in Arkansas, said: "During the early to mid 1980s, I discovered that inmates who were desperately ill were encouraged to sell their blood to make transfusion products.

"At the time I was stupid enough to believe there was a technique to remove the disease elements from the blood." More than 4,500 British haemophiliacs infected with hepatitis C now want a similar inquiry.

A Newcastle haemophiliac, who was last week granted legal aid to fight the Government over a clause that stops him taking action against them for contracting hepatitis C, said: "We have been give a death sentence and want to know why. "I used to cry myself asleep in the early days because I couldn't understand what had gone wrong. My son used to ask why his dad had HIV and his uncle had died from it. "The authorities knew of the risks of using infected blood as far back as the mid-70s and still they continued to accept blood products in Britain that had come from a high-risk country." A spokes person for the Department of Health

admitted little was known about hepatitis C until the mid 1980s.

"Once hepatitis C was identified, all imported blood products had to be heat treated to ensure that the risk of transmission of HIV and hepatitis C was minimised," she said.



JOURNAL UPDATE HCV CAMPAIGN

EXPERTS REFUTE CLAIMS OVER US PLASMA BY LOUELLA HOULDCROFT

Revealed: How we exposed the blood scandal in Saturday's paper. MPs Jim Cousins, top left, and John Cummings, bottom left, are fighting on behalf of haemophiliacs.

EXPERTS have contradicted Government claims that blood products were imported from the USA because Britain could not meet demands. Yesterday, the Government said plasma for haemophiliacs had always been imported from America because demand for the products far outweighed the supply. And it confirmed it had no intention of holding a public inquiry to find out where the infected blood products - responsible for the deaths of over 700 haemophiliacs and for infecting over 4,500 more - had come from. But the Blood Transfusion Service, a Government body, said that Britain had had the potential to become self-sufficient from the early 1980s.

The row followed The Journal's revelations about infected blood products given to haemophiliacs, who later contracted hepatitis C. Jim Moir, corporate communications manager for the Blood Transfusion Service, said: "Britain has always been self-sufficient in whole blood and has had the potential to provide all its own plasma products for a long time - since the early 1980s.

"Currently, no British plasma is used because of the theoretical risk of transmitting the human form of mad cow disease, CJD."

Britain has always had one of the best records for producing safe blood and up until plasma started being imported from abroad, had one of the world's lowest incidences of hepatitis.

In 1974, the World Health Organisation said "countries such as the UK with a low incidence of hepatitis should not use whole blood or blood products obtained from source material from an area in which there is a high incidence of hepatitis."

Britain continued to import plasma from the United States. Haemophiliacs in Britain are now calling for a public inquiry into where the bad blood came from. But a spokesman for the Department of Health said although what had happened was tragic, the Government had no intention of holding a public inquiry.

"When these blood products first became available they were very much in demand among haemophiliacs and we imported them to meet that demand," she said. "At the time we were not self-sufficient and did not realise the risks." MPs in the region are now adding their support. Newcastle Central MP Jim Cousins has been fighting on behalf of haemophiliacs for over a decade and yesterday, Blyth MP Ronnie Campbell added his support.

"Haemophiliacs have been badly treated by the Government," he said. "They were infected by bad blood and now someone has to pay the price." John Cummings, Labour MP for Easington, said: "I will support any measures that can throw light on to how these awful tragedies occurred so they can be prevented from happening again. "If that means a public inquiry then I will help them to fight for it." Chris Hodgson, chairman of the UK branch of the Haemophilia Society, said: "Regardless of what was known about the source of the blood products, America was considered a high risk area for hepatitis. "Perhaps if more precautions had been taken when the risk of HIV was first realised, the spread of hepatitis C could have been reduced." Blood products such as the factor VIII plasma that were shipped into Britain from America were prepared using large vats.

Mr Hodgson said it was this mixing of blood from up to 20,000 different donors which caused "mass contamination" of products. "One infected ampule could literally contaminate hundreds of plasma units and hence their recipients," he said. The main argument used by the Government is that haemophiliacs would not have survived without blood transfusions.

"But more people have now died through HIV and hepatitis C than would ever have died from the inherited condition. Their families deserve some answers."

Scientists to make transfusions safer

SCIENTISTS in the UK are pioneering a new treatment to remove viruses from blood and make transfusions safer.

Experts at the Blood Transfusion Service have developed a method of removing the white cells from blood - a process known as leuco-depletion - and reducing the risk of viruses and other infections being transmitted to patients. Jim Moir, corporate communications manager for the BTS, said the aim was to provide the best and safest blood possible to the country's hospitals. "Through research and development in technology we are constantly looking for ways of improving safety in blood," he said. "England has always had one of the best records for producing safe blood and we are constantly looking for ways to maintain that quality."

The transfusion service provides around 10,000 units of blood a day to hospitals across the UK and has been self-sufficient in whole blood and its products for many years. It has also been responsible for screening blood products imported from abroad, although the time-scale of this has been determined by the development of suitable tests. A Government spokesperson confirmed that a test was available for hepatitis C in Europe from 1988 although it was not introduced here until 1991. The test was delayed due to fears of wasting good blood.

"There was concern about the efficacy of the test and the false positives it was giving," she said. Since the late 1980s all British blood has been heat-treated and all other products screened both here and abroad. While this does not guarantee 100pc safety, it does keep the risk of infection to a minimum. Mr Moir said: "By taking blood from low-risk sources, screening it and treating it we can provide the safest product. The reason we do not use British plasma now is because of the potential risk of CJD which is unproved but still a theoretical risk." He added: "We are trying to ensure there is an adequate amount of safe blood to supply the hospitals in this country and provide the best treatment.

"To meet demand it is vital people continue to give blood and that way we can continue to help people needing transfusions."

What do you think?

Do you believe the Government should order an immediate public inquiry?

Call 0191 201 6151 or e-mail jnl.newsdesk@ncjmedia.co.uk

THE Journal's investigation into the scandal of contaminated blood continues to raise questions that must be answered by those in charge of our health service.

In our latest reports we reveal how plasma imported from the USA was given to British haemophiliacs - some of whom subsequently contracted hepatitis because the stock was contaminated.

The question here is a simple, but important one. Why were clear warnings not heeded? Why was plasma imported from this source used when a 1974 World Health Organisation report warned that Britain should not continue to import plasma from an area with a high incidence of hepatitis? There is no doubt that the USA fell into this category. We - and those whose lives have been destroyed by the scandal of contaminated blood products - await a full explanation.

HOW THE SCANDAL DEVELOPED

- 1960s - first blood transfusions carried out on haemophiliacs in Britain. For almost two decades it was seen as the answer to a genetic disorder that was previously untreatable. To meet demand, over 70pc of the Factor VIII - the plasma product used in transfusions for haemophiliacs - is bought in from America, collected from sources across the world.
- 1975 - the World Health Organisation produces guidelines for Governments to ensure blood products were safe. Pleas for blood "self-sufficiency" in Britain are turned down on financial grounds.
- 1984 - North-East virologist Dr Harash Narang is asked to develop a method of killing the HIV and hepatitis viruses without destroying factor VIII.
- 1985 - All haemophiliacs in the UK are tested for HIV and Aids. Out of 10,000, 1,250 were found to be carrying the virus. In the North-East, 95 out of 105 were infected.
- 1989 - The first test for hepatitis C becomes available in Europe. However, it is not 100pc accurate and Britain and the USA are slow to take it on board.
- 1990 - While never accepting the infection could have been spread through contaminated blood, the Government did make 'sympathy' ex-gratia payments to compensate people for the massive prejudice caused to haemophiliacs by the Aids advertising campaign. The Government insisted on a clause preventing individuals from making any further claims relating to blood-borne infections that may have been caused through transfusion. Documents now show the Government knew of hepatitis C in blood products at this stage.
- 1991 - Routine screening of all blood donations introduced in UK.
- 1992 - Clear evidence that hepatitis C and other infections had been passed on to haemophiliacs through contaminated blood. Out of 10,000 haemophiliacs in the UK, 4,800 have hepatitis C.
- 1993 - Scientists develop a synthetic compound which could be used instead of human blood. But it is twice as expensive as a normal transfusion and its use is limited to children under 16.
- 1994 - North-East haemophiliacs tested for the first time for hepatitis. One Tyneside woman, the partner of a haemophiliac with HIV and hepatitis C, launches a campaign for justice for the few people alive infected with both.
- 2000 - Despite constant pressure from Haemophilia North and the Haemophiliacs Society, the Government refuses to investigate the source of the blood which infected haemophiliacs or how it was allowed to happen. Of the original 95 infected with both viruses in the North-East, just 18 are still alive.
- August, 2000 - Newcastle co-infected haemophiliac becomes the first person to be granted legal aid to take the Government to court in a bid to overturn the hepatitis C waiver.

National Birchgrove thank Louella Houldcroft Health Correspondent.

For all articles, and her continued support. "Victory will be gained"

Today The Journal recounts the tragic story of a Newcastle haemophiliac suffering from HIV and hepatitis C. In the past 20 years he has grimly watched his brother and more than 70 friends die. The devastating problem of HIV-infected blood given to haemophiliacs is already well known.

Victims of the tragedy who were infected with the HIV virus from this source received some compensation in 1990.

This was for the prejudice they had suffered because of the anti-AIDS advertising campaign.

At the same time they were required to sign a waiver preventing them from making future claims for any other blood-borne viruses they might have contacted through transfusions - including hepatitis C.

That was not the end of the affair. Hepatitis C began to affect more and more haemophiliac sufferers and it now seems clear that Government officials knew of this danger when the waivers were offered.

The Newcastle father of one is now fighting the waiver signed in 1990. He wants to finally be told the full truth of what went wrong - and to discover if more could have been done to prevent the tragedies that followed as haemophiliacs died from Aids and hepatitis C. We too want the full facts. That is why we believe there is urgent need for a public inquiry.

Things have changed a great deal since the first experience of HIV. But if people are to continue to have confidence in the blood transfusion service - both as receivers and givers - there must be no lingering doubts about the manner in which it was managed.

(Ed)

We all need to support haemophiliacs fighting on our behalf. Birchgrove calls upon all Haemophiliacs to Unite as one community

