

House of Commons: Written Statement (HCWS480)

Department of Health

Written Statement made by: **The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt)** on 25 Mar 2015.

Infected blood

In January 2011, my predecessor, the Rt. hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Andrew Lansley) recalled with sadness how what happened during the 1970s and 1980s, when thousands of patients contracted hepatitis C and HIV from NHS blood and blood products, is one of the great tragedies of modern health care. I would like to say on behalf of this Government how sorry we are for what happened, and express my sympathy for the pain and grief suffered by many infected people and their families.

Since 1988, the Government has established a number of schemes to provide financial support to people affected by that tragedy. The system has evolved in an ad hoc and incremental manner, now comprising five infection focussed schemes that operate according to their own individual criteria. In January 2011, this Government acknowledged the system then had shortcomings and introduced a number of improvements. Despite these improvements, there have been continued criticisms of the system, as reflected in the reports produced earlier this year by the hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), and by the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Haemophilia and Contaminated Blood, and described by honourable friends and members across the House during the Back Bench Business Committee debate held on 15 January 2015.

From listening to a range of views on the current system, it is apparent that there might be some people who are experiencing significant ill health which may result from their infection(s) who feel they are not well supported by the existing system. However, it is important to recognise there are elements of the current system which do find favour among the beneficiary community. The challenge for any future Government will be to identify the most appropriate way of targeting financial assistance, whilst ensuring that any system can be responsive to medical advances and is sustainable for Government in financial terms.

I thank both the hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) and the APPG for their reports, both of which we are considering carefully. It is with frustration and sincere regret that our considerations on the design of a future system have been subject to postponement whilst we awaited publication of Lord Penrose's final report of his Inquiry in Scotland. We had hoped to consult during this Parliament on reforming the ex-gratia financial assistance schemes, considering, amongst other options, a system based on some form of individual assessment. However, I felt that it was important to consider fully Lord Penrose's report before any such consultation. Given its publication today, we clearly are not in a position to launch a consultation, on one of the last sitting days of this Parliament.

However, Lord Penrose's report has now been published. It can be found on the Inquiry website at: <http://www.penroseinquiry.org.uk/>. Whilst it will be for the next Government to consider all of Lord Penrose's findings, I would hope and fully expect proposals for improving the current complex payment system to be brought forward, with other UK Health Departments.

In the meantime I am pleased to announce that I will be allocating up to an additional one-off £25 million from the Department of Health's 2015/16 budget allocation to support any transitional arrangements to a different payment system that might be necessary in responding fully to Lord Penrose's recommendations. We intend this to provide assurances to those affected by these

tragic events that we have heard their concerns and are making provision to reform the system.

Finally I can formally announce that, in line with our consistent policy of openness, we are now preparing for transfer to the National Archive remaining Department of Health documents relating to blood safety for the period from 1986 to 1995. These documents, which will be open for public scrutiny, will be followed by subsequent tranches of documents covering later years.

Whilst I recognise that this statement does not immediately fulfil the desires of all who campaign on this matter, I hope that it signposts this Government's positive direction on these matters.