



Contaminated Blood – Update – 12.03.2015

As we approach the release date for the Penrose Report (25th March 2015), I wanted to take the opportunity to update you on our work in Westminster.

Following on from the debate in the House of Commons, Diana Johnson MP, Jenny Willott MP, Jason McCartney MP and myself wrote to the Prime Minister. We recognised that the Penrose Report is likely to be far reaching, with implications for the United Kingdom as a whole, and not just the devolved administration in Scotland, and cannot be responded to in detail immediately.

However we do not want the affected community to fear that the end of this Parliament means that this issue is to be lost or forgotten. We believe that enough is already known for the Government to be able to make an interim response, and a commitment for the future. This is an extract from our letter:-

In order to set a response to Penrose in the context of a Government and Parliament deeply concerned about the circumstances which have given rise to so much upset and pain over the years, and not least because the crucial issue of finance will be an element which must require detailed consideration and some time, may we suggest that very soon after the Penrose announcement - whilst Parliament is still sitting if possible - the Government should come forward with a response and some proposals relating to those matters upon which Penrose may not pronounce.

These might include:

- *a proposal for some form of process to enable questions to be asked directly of the Department of Health about what happened and why in the past, as this concern has not gone away, according to the debate and surveys. As the late Paul Goggins suggested, this need not be a formal public inquiry process;*
- *a full government review of the support mechanisms as advocated in the APPG Report. We think the term 'review' should be wide, and should include the possibility of collapsing some of the charities which are most criticised. At the very least, we should ensure the charities are put on a stable long-term financial footing and that they are reformed so that they act as advocates for, rather than adversaries to, their beneficiaries. In establishing the appropriate payments, this review should also have account of the additional costs of living with HIV and/or Hepatitis C, and should be sufficient to lift people well above a poverty line which has been adjusted for the specific needs of those affected.*
- *an acknowledgement that the distinctions between both (a) Stage one and Stage two in Hepatitis C cases; and (b) the support widows/widowers of now-deceased Hepatitis C infectees, set against that provided to those of HIV infectees, are proving inappropriate and should be reviewed;*

- *that further recognition needs to be given to the problems of dependants, and of the unexpected length of life issues for survivors*
- *access to most modern medical treatments*
- *consideration to greater 'passporting' to benefits*

We also suggest that each party makes a manifesto commitment in some form which indicates that this is not forgotten, and that there will be best endeavours to reach a conclusion as soon as possible within the next Parliament.

We stress this is an 'interim' response to Penrose- it does not include all that is required, as that must come after proper consideration of Penrose.

We have written to all the MPs who have been in touch with us about the Contaminated Blood issue and asked them to contact the Minister to press the points above, and to press their own parties to make a manifesto commitment in the impending general election.

I also had the opportunity to raise the matter during Prime Minister's Questions on the 11th March, where the Prime Minister was able to provide a positive response, as follows:

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con):

On 25 March, the Penrose inquiry, which has been looking at the tragedy of contaminated blood in Scotland, will finally report. It is likely to have implications for the rest of the United Kingdom. The time scale means that it is highly unlikely that there will be a full response by this Government before the end of Parliament. Will my right hon. Friend, who has taken a great personal interest in this—as have more than 100 Members of this House—give an assurance that the matter will not slip from his or the Government's agenda, and that as soon as possible in the new Parliament there will be an attempt at closing this terrible tragedy in our country?

The Prime Minister:

Let me first pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for leading on this issue. I suspect that, like me, every Member of Parliament has heard moving stories at their surgeries from constituents who have hepatitis C or HIV because of contaminated blood. It is right to wait for the Penrose inquiry. Let me make it clear that that is not an excuse, because I want us to take action. I am not sure whether that action will ever fully satisfy those who want this wrong to be righted, but as a wealthy and successful country we should be helping these people more. We will help them more, but we need Penrose first, and if I am standing here after the next election it will be done.

I do hope this update is reassuring to you that progress will continue, despite the forthcoming election, and that an interim response will be provided following the release of the Penrose report.

Kind regards

Rt Hon Alistair Burt MP