

Blood Money

Last-week's high court award of damages and compensation to 114 patients infected with the potentially fatal liver disease hepatitis C from contaminated blood supplies underlines the government's shameful treatment of the country's 4,000 haemophiliacs who have been living under a similar death sentence.

They do not benefit from last week's landmark ruling, because they were infected by contaminated blood before the 1988 consumer legislation, under which the patients scored their court victory, came into force. The government has consistently refused them or their families any compensation.

With health ministers considering an appeal against the recent high court ruling, there is no indication of any softening of attitude. Last Friday health minister Lord Hunt offered only "sympathy"- dead handy for anyone who is sick or dying from this vicious strain of hepatitis virus which can cause cirrhosis, liver failure and liver cancer.

More than 100 victims have already died and many more will do so in the coming years. Not only is the government refusing financial aid, it is also refusing to hold a public inquiry into how bad blood supplies went unchecked for so many years. More than 1,200 haemophiliacs were also infected with HIV, of whom 900 have already died from AIDs.

The government's refusal to hold a public inquiry perhaps has something to do with the fact that an inquiry would reveal a continuing scandal of greater magnitude even than BSE.

It would reveal that the risks of contaminated blood supplies have been well known for well over 20 years- certainly during the crucial period that haemophiliacs were being given infected blood products. It would show that the UK ignored warnings not to import from countries like the US, which was harvesting supplies from prisoners, down and outs and drug addicts.

An inquiry would also highlight the continuing dangers of human blood products. In the last few weeks many in the stricken haemophiliac community have learned that as well as being given HIV, and hepatitis B and C from contaminated blood in the 70s and 80s, they were, in the late 90s, also exposed to new-variant CJD.

An inquiry would also highlight the fact that in England, unlike in Ireland, Wales and Scotland the health department is still refusing to provide safe synthetic blood clotting agents to adult haemophiliacs because they are too costly.

The latest nvCJD bombshell has prompted hundreds of haemophiliacs around the country to go on a "treatment strike", believing the pain and risk from their bleeding condition is less than that posed by the diseases to which they have already been exposed - or could still be exposed. - through contaminated blood.

One such victim is 34-year-old Mick Mason who has HIV, hepatitis B and C - and who learned in January that he had also been exposed to 40 doses of nvCJD. It was the last straw. Although he risks dying from a "bleed", he is declining human blood product treatment in protest. "I may as well go down fighting," he said. "They have already given me four potentially fatal diseases --- What can be worse?"

In 1990 the Tory governments miserly concessions to those known to have subsequently contracted HIV were "sympathy payments" of between £20,000 and

£60,000 to settle their claim for damages, with no admission of liability. As many of them believed they had little time to live they accepted. But here lies another scandal which should be investigated. Under threat of having the financial offer withdrawn, they were also obliged to sign a waiver, saying they would not sue for hepatitis C if they eventually contracted it.

At that stage, none of them knew they had hepatitis C and they say they were told that it wasn't that serious, let alone potentially fatal.

Victims who have HIV and hepatitis C and now face the further potential threat of nvCJD are seeking to have the waivers they signed declared illegal by courts. It is their first legal obstacle to compensation and a public airing of their case.

While Ireland, Canada and Germany have set up generous compensation schemes for sufferers and their families and launched public inquiries to discover what went wrong, English victims are increasingly sickened by the Blair government's peddling of the line that "no public interest would be served" by an inquiry.