

The Infected Blood Public Inquiry NEWSLETTER



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HAEMOPHILIA
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A summary of inquiry hearings

This week the inquiry heard evidence from Dr Diana Walford, DHSS medical officer and Lord Simon Glenarthur, junior minister with responsibility for blood and blood products from 1983-5.

Dr Walford had treated patients with cryoprecipitate and remembered their long, painful wait for it to thaw. She did not believe that a switch to cryo in 1983 was feasible because of the relatively small amount

that was being produced in the UK at that time. She was critical of the “weak” treatment guidelines issued by the UKHCDO in June 1983. Dr Walford said there was a “total vacuum of information” but accepted that the number of AIDS cases had been inaccurately conflated with the risk of infection. She was involved with and frustrated by the long-delayed redevelopment of BPL Elstree which she

said was a needlessly “chaotic and protracted” process.

Lord Glenarthur, a hereditary peer and former helicopter pilot, had no previous ministerial experience.

He said ministers had a huge range of responsibilities and could not get involved in every detail. However, he said it was “odd” that he wasn’t shown a document advocating withdrawing US factor VIII from May 1983.

Inquiry in focus: AIDS blood donor leaflet 1983

Dr Diana Walford received a frosty reception at a meeting of Regional Blood Transfusion Centre directors when she gave them the “unwelcome” news that DHSS wanted to produce a leaflet asking people at risk of AIDS not to give blood. The first draft from the directors was not direct enough and was rewritten by Dr Walford and Dr Gunson, director of Manchester RBTC. The re-written leaflet asked if AIDS could be transmitted through blood, to which it answered ‘yes, it can’, but was later modified to ‘almost certainly, yes’. There was sensitivity about targeting the gay population which led to delays in distribution. In July 83 a memo from a DHSS medical adviser said ministers had to weigh the danger of letting “risky blood slip through the net” against minimising “adverse publicity” in deciding how to get the information to donors. It was left to RTBC directors to distribute and was published on 1 September 83. A revised version which explicitly told at risk donors not to give blood was “more positively” promoted but was not published until February 1985, despite warnings that at risk groups were donating blood. Lord Glenarthur said the process was too slow and bureaucratic.

Quotes of the week

“I’m completely sold on the notion that you could have devised a strategy which would have minimised the really significant disruption but what was not there was the time in which to do it.”

Dr Walford on switching from factor VIII to cryoprecipitate in 1983

“In my view the Department has a moral obligation to ensure that any collaboration with industry does not increase the health hazards, not only to recipients of blood products but to the community as a whole.” Memo on industry collaboration at Elstree by Dr Walford in September 1980

“So it was a question of balance of risk, really, that worried me and I wanted to ensure that my ministerial colleagues were happy because I was dealing with it rather more actively than they were, that what I was saying in public and what the Department were doing was correct and justifiable and defensible in every single sense.” Lord Glenarthur on a private meeting with Ken Clarke and John Patten in September 1983

“We may be at the tip of an iceberg with AIDS and find ourselves in trouble in 18 months’ time unless we are really positive in our approach - even if it does embarrass a few gay people.”

Lord Glenarthur on drafts of a leaflet on AIDS and blood donation, Aug 1983

“If there is anything that I said or did, or did not say or did not do, that has contributed in any way to the suffering of those affected or their families then I, of course, I am profoundly sorry.”

Dr Walford