

The Infected Blood Public Inquiry NEWSLETTER



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A summary of inquiry hearings

The inquiry has continued to look at blood transfusion services this week.

Dr Tony Napier was medical director of the Welsh Regional Blood Transfusion Service from 1977 to 1998 and Professor Dame Marcela Contreras was deputy director and then director of North London Blood Transfusion Centre from 1980 to 1995 and held other senior blood service roles until 2007, including with the National Blood Service.

Both witnesses described working in cramped, rundown buildings and spent years lobbying for new facilities, which were eventually built.

As the AIDS crisis emerged, Prof Contreras visited the New York Blood Centre in mid 1984 to learn from its experiences. It led to her unilaterally altering her region's AIDS leaflet for donors to explicitly exclude practicing homosexuals. She also developed a confidential tick-box

form to identify at-risk donors.

Records showed that blood from prisoners was being accepted by the transfusion service in late 1984 in Cardiff. This practice had been stopped in North London in the 1970s, due to high hep B rates.

In 1987 Prof Contreras believed hepatitis C had only 'minor' consequences and did not support screening until early 1991. She told the inquiry that she accepted this was wrong.

Inquiry in focus: better blood transfusions

Prof Contreras was a pioneer in raising awareness about 'more rational' use of blood and blood components for patients who really needed them. In 1990, as director of the North London Blood Transfusion Centre, she conducted an audit of 5 major hospitals in her region. She discovered there was a huge variety in the amount of blood used for the same procedure—such as hip replacements where some hospitals did not use transfusions at all and others used up to six units. The audit also revealed there was no justification for use of 50% of fresh frozen plasma. She set up the first hospital transfusion committee and encouraged more education among clinicians from all specialisms to cut down on unnecessary transfusions and over-transfusions. This led to the adoption of a national policy, Better Blood Transfusion, which significantly reduced the amount of blood used for transfusions. Prof Contreras was asked if this initiative had been introduced earlier, whether it would have reduced the impact of the contaminated blood scandal. She said it 'certainly' would have made a difference, adding: 'The less blood you give, the less infection you transmit.'

Quotes of the week

'There is a relatively high risk of hepatitis B being transmitted by the blood of prisoners...The advice we have received is that it is not necessary to discontinue the collection of blood at prisons.'

Sir Henry Yellowless, Chief Medical Officer, writing to regional medical officers in 1975.

'It is neither ethically nor economically defensible to reduce local blood transfusion activities before curtailing purchases of imported blood products.'

Dr Tony Napier, writing in protest at proposed cuts to the Welsh Regional Blood Transfusion Service in about 1979.

'I think that the UK has fallen behind many other developed countries. We should be at the forefront, not just trailing along at the end...'

Dr Huw Lloyd, director of Newcastle Regional Blood Transfusion Centre, on hepatitis C screening in 1991.

'This inquiry is a reminder that in the epidemic the infection, HIV, was transmitted by sex and by blood, by transfusion and by blood product. I said on this day last year that my team and I would never forget that each and every one who suffered or continues to suffer as a result is a real person and not just a statistic. I meant that then, and I meant that now.'

Sir Brian Langstaff on World AIDS Day, 1 December.

'It was to make clinicians aware of the usage of blood and of the risks of transfusion and of their own practice of transfusion. Make clinicians aware of transfusion medicine, because it was a nonentity before, they took it like saline, you know.'

Prof Contreras on the purpose of hospital transfusion committees, which she introduced.