

MORE SUPPORT FOR CONTAMINATED BLOOD SUFFERERS IN WALES

Health Minister responds to the contaminated blood review

Individuals in Wales who contracted Hepatitis C through contaminated blood from the NHS in the late 1970s and 1980s will benefit from additional support from the Welsh Assembly Government, Health Minister Edwina Hart announced today [8 March 2011].

The move follows the publication of a review of the current support available to those affected and the clinical evidence for further support for these individuals and their families.

Over 4,300 people across the UK who were infected through their treatment have received payments.

The plans in Wales are in line with the announcements made by the Department of Health for England on 10 January and the Scottish Government for Scotland on 4 March.

Currently, anyone with chronic hepatitis C contracted from contaminated blood receives a one-off payment of £20,000. A further £25,000 is paid to those who go on to develop serious liver disease such as cirrhosis or liver cancer. Both these payments are made by the UK-wide Skipton Fund, which was set up in 2003 to support people infected with hepatitis C from NHS blood products.

The new support provisions will:

- Introduce an annual payment of £12,800 for those with the hepatitis C from NHS blood transfusions and blood products and have developed serious liver disease. These payments will be backdated to 10 January 2011;
- Increase the one-off payment already made to those with the most serious hepatitis C-related disease from £25,000 to £50,000;
- Allow relevant patients who develop hepatitis C-related B cell lymphoma to be eligible for the Skipton Fund stage 2 payment;
- Increase the annual payment for those with hepatitis C/HIV in line with the Consumer Price Index to keep pace with living costs;
- Allow relatives of an individual to make a claim for people who died before 29 August 2003 when the Skipton Fund was established. In Wales, there will be no deadline for relatives to register to claim up to £70,000;
- Give access to a discretionary fund for patients and/or their dependents targeted at those in greatest need; and,
- Exempt these payments from means-testing for social care services.

Mrs Hart said:

“Having spoken to a number of people affected by contaminated blood, I am acutely aware of the difficulties they have faced by no fault of their own. Following my discussions with patient groups, I have decided that it would have been inequitable not to implement a comparable package here in Wales.

“The UK Health Secretary Andrew Lansley announced on 10 January that a fund would be established to make discretionary payments to those infected with hepatitis C, similar to arrangement established for HIV. Whilst I intend to implement the fund in Wales, I have sought clarification about how applicants will be assessed and the criteria used.

“I have also asked him to ensure the eligibility criteria for Skipton Fund Stage 2 payments are amended to allow Fibroscan tests – a non-invasive and painless test – as an alternative to the current evidence required for liver diseases.

“It is difficult to give a precise figure on this package of measures but I believe it could provide about £6million worth of additional support to individuals and their families over the course of the next Assembly term.

“This, I hope, will go some way in helping to improve the lives of those tragically infected with hepatitis and/or HIV by contaminated blood products.

“The announcement will also remove the anomaly in place under the old system where families of individuals of people who died before the Skipton Fund was established did not receive any funding.

“People who need lifesaving blood should have confidence in the safety of blood products under the current system, as there have been significant changes since the late 1970s and 80s to make the system safer. This will reduce the risk of such a tragedy occurring again.”

The Minister also announced that she is looking at ways of improving current service provision for those with haemophilia. The Minister has asked Dr Chris Jones, Medical Director, NHS Wales, to establish an expert group to consider service provision for these patients and to make recommendations. Access to therapy services and counselling for individuals affected by contaminated blood and for those with haemophilia will also be considered by the expert group.

Notes:

Two aspects of the review will be handled differently in Wales:

- The changes to prescription “season tickets” will not apply in Wales as this group of patients would have benefited from free prescriptions since 2007 when the exemption system was removed and prescription charges abolished.
- The proposals for additional access to counselling services will be considered as part of a review of current service provision for those with haemophilia in Wales.

Families of individuals may now register to make claims on behalf of loved ones who have passed away. Anyone with hepatitis C who may be eligible under the new arrangements can find out more about what they need to do by contacting the Skipton Fund:

- online: <http://www.skiptonfund.org/Eng/index.html>
- by email: apply@skiptonfund.org
- by phone: 020 7808 1160.

The Skipton Fund was set up in 2003 as a company limited by guarantee.

The principal activity of the company is to implement and manage the UK-wide ex gratia payments scheme for people infected with Hepatitis C from NHS treatment with blood, blood products or tissue.

The company acts as agent for the Department of Health, which in turn acts for the health departments of the devolved administrations.