

UK contaminated blood scandal has global dimensions

By Barry Mason
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Prime Minister Theresa May has been forced to announce an inquiry into the contamination of blood products in the 1970s and 80s that led to the painful deaths of more than 2,400 patients and destroyed the health of many more.

According to a recent parliamentary report, around 7,500 people were affected. May called for the inquiry on July 14 at that morning's cabinet meeting, knowing that otherwise she might lose a motion calling for one presented by Labour MP Diana Johnson later that same day.

Until now, May—as with all previous Conservative and Labour prime ministers—had ruled out calls for a public inquiry.

The 2,400 who died in the UK are among tens of thousands impacted worldwide due to profiteering from the sale of infected blood.

- In the United States around 8,000 haemophiliacs became infected as a result of receiving the contaminated blood products.

- In Canada 2,000 who received the contaminated blood products developed HIV and 60,000 Hepatitis C.

- In France, around 4,000 haemophiliacs were given contaminated blood, and legal proceedings led to the conviction of a health minister and two government officials sent to jail.

- As of 2001 in Italy, an estimated 1,300 people, including almost 150 children, had died from infected blood infusions since 1985.

The majority of those affected by contaminated blood products are haemophiliacs, who suffer from a faulty gene that prevents their blood from clotting. They can be treated with drugs to help their blood to clot.

In the 1970s, the Factor VIII drug became available, which proved to be more effective, acted more quickly and could be self-administered. It greatly improved the

lives of many haemophiliacs who previously might have had to undergo long hospital stays resulting from bleeds.

Factor VIII was produced by pooling the plasma from thousands of blood donations, which was concentrated and refined. This carried an inherent risk that if just one donation among many was infected the whole batch would become infected. The UK was unable to meet the demands for Factor VIII and began to import the product from the US, where production was dominated by a few giant pharmaceutical companies.

Unlike in the UK, blood donors in America were paid to give blood. Many of those giving blood were drug addicts or those with lifestyles likely to compromise their health. It was recognised by the UK's Department of Health (DoH) that health risks such as hepatitis could be the result, but a judgement was made that the benefits outweighed the risks. In Scotland, a decision was made not to use US-supplied Factor VIII and to use only home-produced products because of the risk.

The risk of infection was greatly multiplied in the early 1980s with the outbreak and rapid spread of AIDS. In the US, by the end of 1982, there had been nine reports of HIV infection in haemophiliacs, of whom eight had died.

Warnings about the danger of contaminated blood products were ignored by successive British governments.

In May 1983, the year the first UK AIDS infection related to Factor VIII was detected, Dr. Spence Galbraith, the head of disease control in England and Wales, wrote to the DoH advising that US blood products not be used. On the basis of a shortage of UK-produced Factor VIII, the panel advising on the safety of medicines rejected Galbraith's advice.

A letter sent out to UK haemophilia centres in June

1983 advised that children not be treated with US-sourced Factor VIII and instead be given National Health Service (NHS) concentrates. However, some children continued to be given US product and went on to become HIV infected.

Kenneth Clarke, health minister in the Thatcher Conservative government, claimed, falsely, that there was no concrete proof that AIDS could be transmitted by blood products.

In April 1984, the HIV virus was identified and later that year a test became available. Many haemophiliacs were found to have been infected with the virus. The first case of UK-donated blood infected with HIV was reported.

At the end of that year US researchers discovered that heat-treating Factor VIII killed off the HIV virus. Scotland immediately went over to only dispensing heat-treated Factor VIII. In England, it took a full nine months before all Factor VIII was heat treated and in this period some haemophiliacs became HIV infected.

In 1989, the Haemophiliac Society called on the government to make £200 million available as compensation to the 1,200 people infected as a result of receiving contaminated blood products. Nine hundred people threatened to sue the government. In the end, the government promised those affected a lump-sum payment of just £20,000 each but did not accept liability. Those accepting the money had to sign a waiver saying they would not pursue further action in relation not only to their HIV infection, but also to infections resulting from the Hepatitis C virus.

The Hepatitis C virus had only recently been identified and it was found that many of the haemophiliac patients had been infected with it, along with HIV. Hepatitis C causes liver damage and can induce cancer. It was also found in donated blood from donors in the UK, meaning that not only haemophiliacs but also anyone receiving a blood donation could potentially become infected.

There was no routine testing of anyone given blood in this period, which could have revealed the presence of the Hepatitis C virus leading to prompt treatment. Some victims only became aware when they experience the full impact of symptoms, and there may be still some people unaware that they are harbouring the ravaging virus.

The first inquiry into the contaminated blood scandal

was led by Lord Archer of Sandwell, only reporting in 2009 under the Labour government of Gordon Brown. Archer concluded that commercial interests had been given a higher priority than patient safety. However, his was a non-statutory inquiry with no powers to force those government ministers or civil servants who declined invitations to do so to give evidence. While criticising the government's slow response, Archer did not apportion any blame.

In Scotland, the Scottish National Party-led government announced an inquiry in 2008 that only finally reported in 2015. Another cover-up, it did not take any evidence from anyone at Westminster and concluded that in Scotland all that could have been done was done.

A BBC TV *Panorama* documentary first broadcast in May and repeated in July highlighted how the paper trail related to contaminated blood was concealed.

Haemophiliacs have found it almost impossible to retrieve their medical records. David Watters, General Secretary of the Haemophiliac Society from 1981 to 1993, said all files relating to the HIV crisis, including correspondence with the DoH, had been destroyed.

According to former Labour government Health Secretary David Owen (1974-76), he was unable to get hold of ministerial papers relating to the contaminated blood event and was told they had been "cleaned up" in an attempt to prevent the matter going to court.

In the end four pharmaceutical companies responsible for supplying contaminated blood products—Alpha Therapeutic Corporation, Institut Mérieux (which then became Rhone-Poulenc Rorer Inc., and is now part of Sanofi), Bayer Corporation and Baxter International—paid out just \$660 million to settle cases brought on behalf of 6,000 infected haemophiliacs. This equated to a payment of just \$100,000 to each infected haemophiliac.

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