

'Blood bank' in crisis over cash

by Roger Ratcliffe

THE POSSIBILITY of handing over the plasma section of the National Blood Transfusion Service to private industry, as a means of saving money, is now being studied by the Department of Health. Yet the medical director of the blood products laboratory at Elstree, near London, claims that investment in modernisation would pay for itself by avoiding the need for plasma imports.

For one product alone — the "factor-eight" preparation which performs the vital blood-clotting function absent in the blood of Britain's 4,000 haemophiliacs — it is estimated that £5 million was spent last year on imports, mainly from the US. Against this, the medical director, Dr Richard Lane, says his total budget amounted to only £1.8 million.

The blood transfusion service is facing the most serious financial crisis since it was formed nearly 35 years ago, caused by the general shortage of funds in the National Health Service.

A senior DHSS official confirmed yesterday that approaches had been received from several commercial organisations abroad, interested in taking over the blood products section — which supplies a range of a dozen plasma-derived components for the treatment of haemophilia and immunisation against such diseases as chickenpox, measles and tetanus.

The department's feasibility study has been prompted by the urgent need to modernise the Elstree laboratory, where 160,000 litres of plasma are processed each year. Although the laboratory was converted in 1972 to handle most of the plasma from blood donors in England and Wales, it is already considered obsolete because of its inability to cope with the increased production necessitated by the discovery of new uses for its products.

The DHSS says it does not have the estimated £20 million needed to build a new blood products "factory" on the site.

According to both Dr Lane and the DHSS, a big worry about using imported blood products is the attendant risk of passing on infectious diseases, particularly hepatitis. Suppliers in the US collect much of their blood from Third World countries, where there is a higher incidence of blood infections.

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