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THE OBSERVER

Killer disease alert over gay blood donors

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A PROPAGANDA campaign may be launched in Britain soon to discourage homosexuals from donating blood because of the risk of spreading the mystery disease AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome).

The disease, which kills at least half of those who get it, is thought to be transmittable through blood transfusions, so specialists are demanding closer screening of blood donors.

Homosexuals are considered a high risk group since seven out of 10 of the 1,300 people affected in the United States have been homosexual.

The disease, characterised by a collapse in the body's ability to fight infection, is a medical time-bomb for Britain. Although only 15 cases have been reported since it first crossed the Atlantic in December, 1981, many more people could be harbouring it, for the incubation period is up to three years.

Two groups in Britain are particularly worried about its advent: male homosexuals, because of their particular susceptibility, and haemophiliacs because of their regular treatment with a blood product, known as Factor VIII, derived from donated blood.

The London Gay Switchboard has been inundated with telephone calls after two recent television programmes on the subject and have organised a 500-place conference about it for 21 May.

The Haemophilia Society is also receiving calls from some of Britain's 4,000 haemophiliacs, but is reassuring them that the likelihood of anyone contracting the disease is small. Only 11 haemophiliacs have contracted it so far in the United States.

Dr John Craske, a virus specialist at the Withington Hospital, Manchester, said last week that it was necessary to act quickly. 'There could be a serious problem among the homosexual population,' he said.

'We will have to tackle the question of whether homosexuals should donate blood. Gay associations will have to be circularised and have the situation explained. It will probably then be necessary to rely on their altruism.'

Dr Tom Davies, director of the North London Blood Transfusion Service, said that, asking people whether they were homosexual was a problem. 'We get Catholic priests, coming here to donate blood. Can you imagine what the reaction would be if we were to ask such a question?' The epidemic spreads, p 27.