

ANOTHER BLOODY WHITEWASH

THE Department of Health has just produced a 30-page report whitewashing its failure to stop importing high-risk blood products from the US which infected thousands of haemophiliacs with the liver disease, Hepatitis C virus (HCV).

As *Eye* readers will be well aware, more than 3,000 haemophiliacs in the UK contracted fatal liver disease from contaminated blood products, and many contracted HIV too. After a lengthy battle, two years ago they were finally granted "compassion payments" of between £20,000 and £45,000.

However, they have read with scorn the DoH report which concludes that they would still have been infected with HCV from contaminated blood even if the UK had stopped relying on imported donor supplies as it had pledged (but failed) to do in the mid-1970s. Especially enraged are those who have now traced their HCV infection back to blood products sourced from high risk inmates in US jails.

The DoH authors conclude that "available" evidence suggested that at the time HCV (then identified as Non-A, Non-B hepatitis) was perceived as a mild and often asymptomatic disease and the advantages of blood clotting products was seen to outweigh any disadvantages. "Domestically sourced blood products carried this risk, albeit a smaller risk of HCV transmission, and therefore it is likely that, over time, the majority of haemophiliac patients in England and Wales would have contracted the hepatitis C virus," says the report.

It has to be asked what "available" evidence the DoH authors were studying, because evidence passed to the *Eye* some years ago showed that in the mid-1970s doctors in California wrote to the UK's then Blood Products Laboratory with a stern warning. They asked that the UK no longer source blood products from commercial blood centres in the US because of the high rates of "post transfusion" hepatitis – more than half of which

were even then known to be a Non-A, Non-B hepatitis. In 1974 one of America's leading blood specialists wrote: "It does not take much commercial blood to bring up an astounding infection rate from one that is relatively unnoticed."

The US doctors also warned that the "agent is more frequently found in [the] lower socio-economic group of paid and prison donors... it is minimal among volunteer donors."

At the same time *The Lancet* also reported that a new hepatitis virus (which was HCV) had been isolated and was responsible for a staggering 90 percent of transfusion-associated illness in the US. In fact most studies of new hepatitis disease were among the recipients of blood products.

But last week's report makes no mention of these clear warnings, nor what was (or was not) done about them. And even though the then health secretary Dr David Owen promised that Britain would be self-sufficient in blood products by 1977 and made more resources available to the regional blood centres, the goal was never achieved. Blood continued to be brought in from operations abroad known to be unreliable. Today the haemophiliac community and others are still suffering and even dying often horrible deaths as a result.

The DoH whitewash does not explain either how or why some sufferers who contracted HIV were also secretly tested for HCV – but not told the results and nor why they were never informed of any of the risks of their treatment. The whole report only serves to highlight further the need for a full public inquiry into this public health disaster.

● While former partners and dependants of haemophiliacs who died of HCV liver failure are still fighting for the "compassion" money offered by the government, it has emerged that the man administering the scheme, Keith Foster, is under investigation for fraud. Foster was suspended by



the Skipton Fund directors in January amid concerns that around £450,000 had gone missing. He is apparently also being investigated in relation to his previous employment with the British Association of Hand Therapists.

● In January the government announced that it was extending the provisions of the Skipton Fund. Until then it only paid out to current sufferers and the dependants of those infected patients who had died between August 2003 and July 2004. Now the government has lifted the July cut-off date, which will benefit about a dozen partners or dependants and still leave most exempt from any compensation.

SIGNAL FAILURES

Darling's FCC ups

ALISTAIR Darling's transport department, adept at botching rail franchises, has surpassed itself with Thameslink.

Thameslink, to be given the catchy new name First Capital Connect when the franchise begins next month, was awarded to FirstGroup after other bidders said Darling's pen-pushers had devised an unworkable service specification. The deal assumed 13 trains would transfer to FCC when Southern took over Gatwick Express. But hours after revealing last month that Gatwick Express would be axed, Darling's crack civil servants said they'd released the wrong document and that Gatwick Express could survive after all.

Darling won't allow the obvious solution – build more trains. He insists the Tories' rail privatisation brings in private investment, but commuters are still sardined into a Thameslink fleet nearly 25 percent smaller than under British Rail.

The treasury won't fund more trains when privatised rail already swallows about five times BR's subsidy and Darling needs an incompetence allowance. In 2004-5 Thameslink's tunnel under London closed for eight months for construction work, but Darling blocked a new St Pancras station (*Eye* 1124) when builders had free movement around the subterranean site. Last month he changed his mind. His dithering has upped the cost to £50m. Trains running through the building site will complicate site management. The station is needed when Eurostar trains switch from Waterloo to St Pancras next year, so builders will work night shifts, at premium rates, to make up for lost time.

“NEW” Labour is showing its commitment to global warming by ordering rail cuts in Cornwall. Draft First Great Western timetables, released last month, show four trains a day for Newquay instead of seven, despite 40 percent passenger growth in four years. Apparently there isn't enough public cash to maintain existing services.

A fortnight later Transport Minister Karen Buck was in Newquay, “delighted” to open the local airport's £2.8m upgrade. The investment, covered entirely by public funds, will cater for “future growth” – ie boost Ryanair and others flying to Newquay from London, Bristol and elsewhere advertising fares “from £0.19”.

PS: In 2002 the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution said: “If no limiting action is taken, the rapid growth in air transport will proceed in fundamental contradiction to the government's stated goal of sustainable development. Short-haul passenger flights, such as UK domestic and European journeys, make a disproportionately large contribution to the global environmental impacts of air transport and these impacts are very much larger than those from rail transport.”

ONE TRAGEDY of rail privatisation was the turfing out of experienced rail managers, as if tainted by their state-sector past. The new train operators, mostly bus firms, learned that lesson the hard way – except for Go-Ahead Group plc. Most senior managers at state-owned South Eastern Trains have now been told to go away by Go-Ahead, majority partner in the Govia joint venture which won the new Kent franchise. Marching orders were given despite SET's good record, acknowledged by the National Audit Office (*Eye* 1148), in turning around the legacy of sacked operator Connex.

SET's record compares well with Go-Ahead's, which includes a £2m fine for the 1999 Paddington crash (31 deaths). Go-Ahead is a collection of bus firms which bagged the Kent franchise by asking for 1.7 percent less subsidy than its closest rival, knowing the government will bail it out if necessary to avoid disrupting preparations for the all-important “Olympic javelin” trains to Stratford in 2012. Despite a decade of disappointment from rail privatisation, bus-company managers still lord it over people who know how to run a railway.

‘Dr B. Ching’

