

Transfusion patient wins £750,000 for HIV infection

By Nick Britten

A PATIENT was awarded £750,000 from the National Blood Service yesterday after being infected with a variant of the HIV virus during an operation.

Alan Best, 64, developed human T-cell lymphotropic virus type 1 (HTLV-1) after a transfusion during surgery for pancreatitis at the Nuffield Hospital, in Birmingham, in February 1995.

Soon after the operation Mr Best lost 4st and found it difficult to walk. The condition attacks the central nervous system and he had to give up work at MG Rover, at Longbridge, Birmingham, where he had been employed since leaving school.

He can no longer live an independent life, relying on help from family and friends. There is no cure and he is expected to be in a wheelchair in two years.

Mr Best said he also had to live with the stigma of having an HIV-related illness, which can be caught as a result of drug abuse and through sexual activity.

"At first I was angry and bitter," he said. "But I learned that I had to cope and the only way of coping is to have your family around."

Mr Best, from Bromsgrove, Worcs, was a keen hill-walker, gardener and footballer. Now he cannot walk unaided, shopping with his wife, Rita, 52, has to be planned well ahead because of his lack of strength and a chair has been reserved for him at the bar of his local.

He said he had thought it was only a matter of time before he recovered from the operation. Then things began to get worse.

"While I was on holiday in Jersey with Rita, I found I could not run across the road when I saw a car coming. It was as if I was trying to run on ice. We had no idea what was causing it and it was two years until doctors finally diagnosed HTLV-1.

"It was suggested that I could have caused myself to be infected so I felt exonerated when they discovered that the blood transfusion was to blame."

At the end of seven years of legal action, the High Court in Birmingham agreed the award after the National Blood Service admitted providing defective blood by failing to screen it for HTLV-1.

Mr Best's solicitor, Timothy Deeming, said: "At the time, the National Blood Service was not screening donated blood for the presence of HTLV-1, although the existence of this virus was known prior to the discovery of HIV and a test was available."

It is estimated that 20 million people are infected with HTLV-1, which is endemic in Japan, the Caribbean, the south-eastern United States and parts of South America and Africa.

Dr Pat Hewitt, of the National Blood Service, said that at the time of Mr Best's operation HTLV testing was not routine because the service had to "base decisions on information such as how common these viruses were in the blood donor population, how much of a risk they presented and what could be done with the resources available".

Routine testing started in 2002. Between August 2002 and December 2003, 66 HTLV infections were confirmed among 3.5 million donations tested in England and Wales.

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