

Change of heart on hepatitis C

By Oliver Wright
Health Correspondent

THE Government is to pay £100 million in compensation to thousands of people infected with hepatitis C from contaminated blood products.

In a sudden reversal of nearly two decades of policy on the issue John Reid, the Health Secretary, said yesterday that he had decided to make the money available on compassionate grounds. No details of how the scheme will work have yet been officially announced, but all those infected are expected to receive at least £20,000, rising to £45,000 for those who have suffered serious harm from the virus.

Among the first of those expected to benefit are 2,800 haemophiliacs who were infected through contaminated clotting agents they were given during the 1970s and 1980s.

There are also believed to be several thousand other NHS patients who were infected by contaminated blood during operations and other invasive treatments before accurate screening could be established in 1991.

Hepatitis C was first identified in the 1980s and so far about 26,500 people have been told that they have the condition, which can lead to cirrhosis of the liver and liver cancer. About a hundred people a year die from the

condition, which can go undetected for years.

The most common way of catching the virus is injecting drugs with contaminated equipment, although it can be sexually transmitted, passed from mother to baby and spread through shared toothbrushes or shavers. The infection cannot be spread through normal everyday contact.

Announcing the move Mr Reid hinted that it had been a personal decision. "After becoming Secretary of State, I looked at the history of this issue and decided on compassionate grounds that this is the right thing to do in this situation," he said.

"I have therefore decided in principle that hepatitis C sufferers should receive ex-gratia payments from the Department of Health."

Mike Payne, 50, a haemophiliac who was given a hepatitis diagnosis in the 1980s, said he would use the money to secure the future of his two young children. "Because I cannot get life insurance this compensation will be very important to my family," he said.

The move was welcomed by the Haemophilia Society. Its chief executive, Karin Pappenheim, said it had been entirely unexpected. "I think we have been in to see every Health Secretary since 1995 to press this point but without success," she said.

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