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Doctor says hepatitis blood tests could cost millions

THE HEALTH service faces a bill running into millions of pounds to screen blood donations for a newly identified form of hepatitis, it was said yesterday.

The development of a test which can reveal the presence of the virus, known as hepatitis C, poses significant problems for the blood transfusion service. The alternatives are either to face the considerable extra cost of screening for the virus, leading inevitably to a loss of much needed donors, or pass on potentially contaminated blood for use in transfusions. There is no known treatment for hepatitis C, which in most cases will produce no ill effects, but can lead to the potentially fatal condition, cirrhosis of the liver.

The isolation of the hepatitis C virus has given a name to a

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problem which the transfusion service has been aware of for a number of years. Screening for hepatitis B was introduced in the 1970s but some people continued to contract hepatitis and it is now known that they were falling victim to this new form of the disease.

Dr Brian McClelland, director of the south-east of Scotland blood transfusion service, said that what is new is that a test has been developed to detect the presence of hepatitis C, offering the prospect of improving the safety of blood supplies. He said that was still being evaluated but, if the service were convinced of its worth, it would have a duty to

recommend to government that screening be introduced.

Dr McClelland said that would cost millions of pounds to establish and he expected that ministers would have to judge its value against competing claims for health service cash.

He estimates that around one per cent of the population may prove to have the hepatitis C virus. "For the vast majority, such a finding would be of no significance at all but in some cases there may be an eventual progression to some form of liver disease."

The Scottish Office said yesterday that United Kingdom health departments were examining the position along with the blood transfusion service before making any decision about screening.

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