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AIDS

Mr. Butterfill asked the Secretary of State for Social Services what efforts his Department is making to find an effective test to screen for the virus which causes acquired immune deficiency syndrome; and when he expects such a test to be introduced.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: I am pleased to say that a test will be introduced within the next few months to screen all blood given by blood donors for antibodies to the virus which causes AIDS. Arrangements will also be made for sexually transmitted diseases clinics to provide an AIDS test for people who fear they may have been exposed to the disease.

I understand and share the concern to get these tests in use as soon as possible. However, we must have tests which are accurate and can be trusted. A number of test kits are already available and in use abroad, but reports from those countries suggest that the tests are not entirely reliable. We believe that no test should be introduced in the United Kingdom until its reliability has been established. There is no point in introducing a test which often fails to detect antibodies in blood or detects antibodies where there are none. An evaluation programme is being undertaken by the Public Health Laboratory Service and National Blood Transfusion Service experts as a matter of urgency. It is essential to complete this programme if we are to have a sensible policy that really does protect the public. Contrary to reports in today's press, no decisions on choice of test kits have yet been made. We hope that we will be able to introduce a test within four to five months. We are also making arrangements to offer counselling to anyone whose blood is found to be positive.

We expect that the number of blood donors found to have antibodies is likely to be very small. The risk of contracting AIDS from receiving a blood transfusion remains extremely small and screening will reduce this risk still further. There is no risk at all to those giving blood of contracting AIDS.