

Item 15 of 24.5.83

AIDS AND BLOOD TRANSFUSION

Some Background to the Recent Publicity

There has been a lot of publicity about AIDS in the media recently. We thought we should explain something about the disease for donors who are worried about what it may mean for the B.T.S.

What is AIDS?

It is a disease called (A) (I) (D) (S)

acquired immune deficiency syndrome which is thought to be caused by an infectious agent, perhaps a virus. So far the cause is unknown. It is a rare disease but it can have serious consequences.

When a person develops AIDS, the body's immune system becomes abnormal and there is a great risk of serious infections and even cancer, both of which can be fatal.

What are the Symptoms?

Fever, weight loss, enlargement of lymph glands and recurrent infections are the common symptoms.

Who can get the Disease?

AIDS has been occurring, particularly in the USA, in certain people who are apparently susceptible to the disease:

- 1) Homosexual men, particularly those with multiple partners;
- 2) Drug abusers;
- 3) Sexual contacts of people with AIDS - women can be infected if the males are bisexual;

4) Italian immigrants to USA;

5) Haemophiliacs - who may be more susceptible or may become infected by their use of blood products which may have come from a blood donor with AIDS.

Most (but not all) cases have occurred in the homosexual male population. Why this should be is not yet known. A small number of young children have been affected.

Has AIDS occurred in UK?

The answer is yes. So far only a few cases have occurred, and again these have been in the homosexual male population.

Does this mean the UK is relatively safe?

We do not know. The disease is spreading in the USA and it is possible it has not reached UK yet to the same extent. If it does, we may have many more cases.

Can it be transmitted by Blood Transfusion?

It appears it can. This might cause the disease in people who are not normally at risk. It may have infected clotting factors that caused AIDS in Haemophiliac men in USA.

We have not had any definite cases of AIDS in Haemophiliacs in UK. If the clotting factor concentrate (factor VIII) can be infected, then cases could occur in UK because much of the factor VIII is imported to UK from USA.

The disease cannot be taken lightly. Those getting AIDS may die, because they are more susceptible to serious infections and cancer due to their impaired immune system.

The Blood Transfusion Service is therefore concerned to try and stop any chance of infection spreading by blood transfusion.

We want to ask people who may be at risk from the disease to avoid giving blood until we have a suitable screening test. Many donors will remember we did this with hepatitis until we had screening tests for the hepatitis virus.

Whose Blood Could be a Risk?

All our information about at risk groups comes from the USA. However, until more is known about the cause and spread of AIDS, we would ask the following groups to refrain from donating blood:

- 1) Homosexual men;
- 2) Women who continually have multiple sexual partners;
- 3) Partners of bisexual men;
- 4) Anyone who abuses drugs;
- 5) Anyone who has been in contact with a case of AIDS.

We hope that if we take precautions now, we can prevent the problem of AIDS which has become serious in USA.

Remember it is a rare disease but an important one.

Thank you for your help.

DR. A. SMITH
May, 1983.

S.E. Scotland Blood Transfusion Service

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