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SNBTS Policy Position on HCVBriefing Notes for Staff

There has been some media interest in our policy on HCV testing, particularly regarding "look-back" The following is the SNBTS position

- 1) The UK Blood Transfusion Services aim to take full advantage of proven medical and scientific advances particularly in the areas of donor and patient safety. New improved techniques are being incorporated into routine practice every year.
- 2) In the case of the virus associated with Hepatitis C, testing of all blood donations was introduced in September 1991 as soon as appropriate tests had been validated for routine use. All donations testing positive are discarded and full information is given to the donors involved.
- 3) The introduction of this testing has added a further safety improvement to a national blood supply that was already very safe indeed. Donors in Scotland have been giving generously for over 50 years and over 9 million pints were provided for patients during the years before the Hepatitis C virus was discovered. Only a tiny proportion of these have lead to any serious effects caused by Hepatitis C or any other virus.
- 4) Clinical and research teams all over the world are steadily improving our understanding of the virus and its effects but this process is still far from complete. Though rare, the Hepatitis C virus seems to occur naturally among the population at large and it is estimated that it is present in just over 1000 people in Scotland. Many of these feel no ill effects as a result. In some cases, however, infection with the virus may lead to serious liver disease. This seems to occur many years after the original infection and may also be associated with factors other than the virus itself, particularly alcohol consumption.
- 5) The developing scientific and medical understanding of Hepatitis C is a relatively new area of knowledge.
- 6) Until very recently there has been no treatment known to provide an effective cure and there was thought to be little benefit in the early identification of the virus in any particular individual. Therefore, when routine anti Hepatitis C testing of blood donations was introduced in 1991, it was not judged medically appropriate to seek out those few patients who might have contracted the virus from a blood transfusion in the years before testing was introduced.
- 7) However, the BTS has kept this policy under review. Recent clinical trials now suggest that beneficial treatment for some patients with acute Hepatitis C may be a possibility. The Service is, in consultation with medical colleagues, assessing if any benefits might be gained from a "look-back" exercise
- 8) Meantime, we will of course arrange a confidential interview with a blood transfusion service medical officer for anyone who is or has been a donor and who is worried about Hepatitis C.

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