DOCTORS GIVEN ADVICE ON AIDS SCREENING TESTS

Dr Donald Acheson, the Government's Chief Medical Officer, has written to all doctors providing information and advice on the new screening tests for AIDS that will shortly be introduced.

From mid October (probably Monday 14 October) all blood donations will be screened by the National Blood Transfusion Service's Regional Transfusion Centres.

At the same time alternative facilities for providing antibody tests on a confidential basis will become available at Genito Urinary Medicine clinics. In addition all District Health Authorities are making arrangements to carry out antibody tests on patients referred by general practitioners.

Commenting on the new testing arrangements Dr Acheson said: "The synchronous provision of these arrangements is to ensure that people who believe themselves at risk of infection do not donate blood in order to be tested. This is crucial because even a reliable test cannot detect very early infections to which an antibody response has not yet been generated. In conjunction with the alternative testing facilities, arrangements will be made to advise people who attend requesting the test of the implications that it might have for them."
"It is essential that all individuals who are found to have positive antibody tests receive counselling both in order that they understand the meaning of the results and to advise them how to avoid transmitting the infection to others. Health authorities have been asked to provide counselling services; such services will also be available at the Regional Transfusion Clinics for blood donors found to be sero-positive.

"The chance of any blood donor proving sero-positive is extremely small and there is absolutely no danger in giving blood. It is crucial in the public interest that the number of volunteers prepared to come forward to give blood does not decline."

In his letter Dr Acheson re-emphasised the need for strict confidentiality. He said: "The antibody test is an important tool in the control of the spread of HTLVIII infection. If it is to be used effectively very strict confidentiality must be maintained in respect of positive results."

NOTE TO EDITORS

In June 1985 the then Minister for Health announced the intention to introduce screening of all blood donations for the HTLVIII antibody (the antibody to the AIDS related virus).

The Public Health Laboratory Service conducted an evaluation of the commercially available test kits and three kits proved to be the most suitable for use in diagnostic laboratories. Two tests also appeared to be particularly suitable for use in Blood Transfusion Centres and further evaluation by the National Blood Transfusion Service was undertaken.