

UK contaminated blood inquiry to publish findings, as more heinous crimes are revealed

Robert Stevens

9 May 2024

The six-year-long UK public inquiry into the contaminated blood scandal is to announce its findings this month, on May 20. During the 1970s and 1980s, major pharmaceutical companies supplied “Factor 8” blood products infected with the hepatitis and HIV viruses, leading to the deaths since of thousands of people in the UK and internationally.

Around 30,000 people in the UK were infected with hepatitis C and/or HIV after receiving contaminated blood or blood products, including 380 children. At least 3,000 died and the rest were left severely ill. The death rate among survivors is extremely high, with roughly one person affected dying every four days, and many having their lives destroyed.

So horrific are the events and the subsequent decades-long cover-up by successive governments that gruesome details are still emerging in the weeks up to the publication of the Inquiry’s report.

In April, the BBC revealed new documents showing medical trials involving children had taken place for more than 15 years, with many infected with hepatitis C and HIV.

The practises, recalling the hideous medical experiments of the Nazi “Angel of Death” Josef Mengele, involved carrying out trials on children with blood clotting disorders. In many cases this was done without families consenting to the children taking part. The majority of the children who were enrolled in the trials are now dead, many dying decades before their natural life span.

The BBC reported on a number of cases:

Luke O’Shea-Phillips, now aged 42, has haemophilia—a blood clotting disorder that means he bruises and bleeds more easily than most.

The BBC notes, “He caught the potentially lethal viral infection hepatitis C while being treated at the Middlesex Hospital, in central London, which was administered because of a small cut to his mouth, aged three, in 1985.

“Documents seen by the BBC suggest he was deliberately given the blood product - which his doctor knew might have been infected - so he could be enrolled in a clinical trial.

“The doctor wanted to find out how likely patients were to

catch diseases from a new version of heat-treated Factor VIII. Though he had never been treated for his condition before, Luke was given heat-treated Factor VIII to stop his mouth bleeding.”

The BBC confirmed the existence of a letter from Luke’s doctor, Samuel Machin, to another doctor, Peter Kernoff, based at London’s Royal Free Hospital.

“Machin detailed the treatment of Luke and another boy, asking: ‘I hope they will be suitable for your heat-treated trial.’”

Speaking to the BBC, Luke said, “I was a guinea pig in clinical trials that could have killed me... There is no other way to explain it—my treatment was changed so I could be enrolled in clinical trials. This change in medication gave me a fatal disease—hepatitis C—yet my mother was never even told.”

The BBC’s report states, “Documents reveal doctors knew Luke had contracted hepatitis C as early as 1993, but he was not told until 1997. One medical record states a positive test result and says: ‘Have not discussed with patient or family’.”

Luke is now clear of the disease after successful treatment, but many others involved in the trial have perished. Among them are many from Treloar’s College, a disabled children’s specialist boarding school near Alton, in Hampshire, England, with an NHS haemophilia unit on site.

The BBC reports that the school’s doctor, Anthony Aronstam, who like Machin and Kernoff is now dead, “used his ‘unique’ cohort of boys for extensive clinical trials. One series of experiments considered whether using three to four times more Factor VIII than normally required by a child would help to reduce the number of bleeds he had.”

This “involved repeated injections with infected Factor VIII products and follow-up blood tests. The high concentrations of infected blood products were administered to the boys without their—or their parents’—consent.”

The majority (75) of the 122 pupils attending Treloar’s College between 1974-1987 have died of HIV and hepatitis C infections.

Large numbers of people are living with the consequences of these medical experiments without even knowing it. According to a BBC analysis of statistics submitted to the Inquiry and Freedom of Information requests submitted to infected blood support schemes, “About 1,750 people in the UK are living with an undiagnosed hepatitis C infection after being given a transfusion with contaminated blood.”

If not detected and treated, hepatitis C remains in the body for years, increasing the chances of a horrific death. One of the victims who died last year, Maureen Arkley, was diagnosed with hepatitis C and died five months later of untreatable liver cancer, weighing less than four stone. Maureen had an operation in 1976 involving multiple blood transfusions and was never tested for hepatitis C over the next five decades.

Besides grotesquely unethical “research” motives, financial incentives were at play. In November 1976, the *Telegraph* writes, “Immuno AG, an Austrian company that was a major supplier to the Department of Health, was seeking a licence change to allow it to supply a blood product from those paid to donate in the US...”

“According to the minutes of a meeting of medics in the company, it had been ‘proven’ that there was a ‘significantly higher hepatitis risk’ from a concentrate known as Kryobulin 2 made from US plasma...”

However, “The company had concluded there was a ‘preference’ in the UK for the cheaper US option. The memo of the meeting said: ‘Kryobulin 2 will be significantly cheaper than Kryobulin 1 because the British market will accept a higher risk of hepatitis for a lower-priced product.’”

The paper reports on a letter from January 1981 showing St Thomas’ Hospital in London “was offered thousands of pounds in rebates for buying Factor VIII made in the US by Bayer and Baxter Healthcare.”

“For every 250,000 units purchased, Dr Geoffrey Savidge, director of St Thomas’ haemophilia centre, was offered £400, equivalent to almost £2,000 today.”

Again, the risks were known. “When the first three people with haemophilia came down with AIDS in the US in July 1982,” writes the *Telegraph*, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) warned the fatal illness could be caused by a blood-borne agent in Factor VIII.

“In December 1982, Bayer’s Cutter Laboratories discovered chimpanzees had developed AIDS-like symptoms after also being treated with Factor VIII, according to an internal memo. However, the company didn’t warn patients about the potential risks.”

The paper adds, “Revlon Healthcare-owned Armour Pharmaceuticals suppressed evidence from 1985 to 1986 that HIV had been discovered in its ‘safe’ version of Factor

VIII, which had been heat-treated to kill viruses.”

Two Conservative governments (1979-1997) and two Labour governments (1997-2010) ensured that a systematic cover-up took place.

The BBC reported how the Inquiry “has also heard how several batches of minutes and background papers involving the work of the Advisory Committee on the Virological Safety of Blood were shredded between 1994 and 1998. The files were destroyed at a time when officials were told there was ‘considerable potential for litigation’ over infected blood and after ministers were charged in France over the scandal in poisoning haemophiliacs.”

In 2019, the Inquiry heard of medical records going missing without a trace for those infected after blood transfusions.

An interim report published by the Inquiry’s Chair Sir Brian Langstaff last year concluded that “wrongs were done at individual, collective and systemic levels” and that parents and children who suffered bereavements as a result of infected blood should receive £100,000 interim compensation payments.

Whether this is acted on by the Sunak government remains to be seen. Even if so, it in no way compensates for the thousands of deaths and decades of ruined lives.

Nor would it see justice done. The Inquiry is governed by the Blair Labour government’s 2005 Inquiries Act, which excludes determining “any person’s civil or criminal liability.”

Such cruel and murderous crimes should be punished by the courts. A full criminal investigation should be launched, with all those who played a part in the distribution, administering and covering up of infected blood—whether in political or corporate circles or within the National Health Service—charged and brought to trial.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)