

Another bloody disgrace

HAEMOPHILIACS infected with fatal viruses including HIV and hepatitis from contaminated blood products have been dealt another blow by a government that refuses to acknowledge one of the biggest NHS treatment scandals of all time.

A private member's bill introduced with widespread backing by Lord Morris would have provided greater support and compensation for those who have been sentenced to death or debilitating illness. It would also have helped their carers and the bereaved; but the bill is now doomed thanks to four separate attempts by government toadies to torpedo it in the Commons without debate.

The toadies included junior whip Kerry McCarthy, along with John Spellar (twice) who made formal "objections" to Morris's bill, effectively stopping it in its tracks. When outraged constituents in McCarthy's Bristol East seat complained, her weasel-worded excuse was that she was only carrying out her "procedural role... to announce the government's decision not to allow the bill to proceed through the Commons without a debate".

This was in fact poppycock because the bill could be debated as it passes through committee stage – and campaigners like Lord Morris have in any case been pressing for just such a debate in government time.

Eye readers are already aware of the humiliation and struggle faced by nearly 4,800 haemophiliacs who were given contaminated blood products in the 1970s and 1980s, even when the dangers of imported blood from high-risk prisoners and drug addicts in the US were well-known. They have been dying by the week from liver cancers, cirrhosis and HIV; more have recently been exposed to variant CJD, the human form of mad cow disease, and the death toll so far stands at around 1,974.

The government steadfastly refuses a public inquiry into their plight, but thanks to the generosity of private donors, an inquiry (albeit one with no legal status and no power to subpoena witnesses), was chaired by Lord Archer of Sandwell, the former solicitor-general.

Despite having one hand tied behind his back, Archer made recommendations which would have provided support to UK victims on a par with those granted to haemophiliacs in Ireland – which like Canada, France and Germany has held a full inquiry into the contaminated blood scandal and which now provides adequate assistance.

The UK government all but ignored the Archer findings; and payments remain woefully inadequate and over-complex, reducing most sufferers, their carers or the bereaved to poverty.

Lord Morris's bill would have given the report legal status and put the haemophiliacs on a similar footing to their Irish counterparts. But despite the relatively small costs of such a move, the government remains determined to ignore their plight.

The courts may just cause it to think again, however. Later this month haemophiliacs will claim in a judicial review that the government's decision to reject Archer's recommendations over compensation was unlawful. Watch this space.