

Doctor issues alert on liver risk to gays

By Andrew Veitch,
Medical Correspondent

Hospital doctors are being told that they must not vaccinate gay men against the incurable liver disease hepatitis B, because the NHS cannot afford it, specialists said yesterday.

The blood-borne virus which causes the often fatal condition is spreading rapidly throughout western Europe. But the Department of Health has yet to authorise a full-scale programme to protect homosexuals, the people most at risk.

"We are told we are not to give the vaccine as we haven't got the money," said Dr William Harris, head of the special clinic at St Mary's Hospital, Paddington, London.

Patients could ask their GPs for the vaccine but to do so they had to disclose that they were homosexual. Many gays were unwilling to do that, preferring to be treated in confidence at special clinics.

Dr Harris added: "We would like to vaccinate our patients. We have the expertise and the facilities. But we are unable to do so because the cost comes out of the hospital budget. So we are encouraged to send patients to GPs because their costs come out of a different budget. That's tragic and ludicrous."

Dr Harris, with specialists from the two other London hospitals who treat most hepatitis B cases, yesterday called for a programme to vaccinate more than 20,000 gay men.

A five-year immunisation programme would probably cost over £4 million, but might save more than £20 million in the cost of treating the victims, said Professor Michael Adler of the Middlesex Hospital.

Up to half the male homosexuals in Britain are thought to have been infected. About 10 per cent are actively infectious. There were 100,000 new cases of the disease in Western Europe last year.

A new genetically engineered vaccine, made by Merck Sharp and Dohme, protect people at risk. But it costs £7 for a course of injections and the Department of Health guidelines restrict its use to sexual contacts of infected people, health workers, and patients such as haemophiliacs who may be given infected blood products.

Up to 1.5 million people in Britain are considered at high risk of contracting the virus — mostly gay men and drug addicts. People may be carrying the virus and be infectious without knowing it. Some go on to suffer liver failure and cancer.

Working groups from the Royal College of Physicians and the Department of Health's joint committee on vaccination and immunisation have recommended that homosexuals should be offered vaccination, but health ministers have yet to act.

The Police Federation says hepatitis B vaccination should be offered to officers likely to come into contact with infected drug addicts. "We have been unable to persuade the Home Office or the Department of Health that it would be worth the expenditure," the federation spokesman said yesterday.

Sir Donald Acheson, the Government's chief medical officer, has urged doctors to keep vaccinating as many children as possible against whooping cough to counter the expected autumn upsurge

Morning Star

Hepatitis vaccine plan for gay men demanded

HEALTH experts called yesterday for a mass immunisation programme for gay men against Hepatitis.

A preventative vaccine has been available for five years and yet only a minority of gay men had been vaccinated, said the experts at a Royal Society of Medicine press conference.

Prof. Michael Adler, professor of genitourinary medicine at the Middlesex Hospital, called on the government to fund a five-year programme costing between £2 million and £4 million to screen and immunise gay men attending sexually transmitted disease clinics against Hepatitis B. This group numbers about 20,000.

He also urged the Department of Health and Social Security to broaden and clarify its guidelines to health authorities so that gay men were guaranteed the vaccine by being identified as a "high risk" group.

Gay men make up the largest group of the 1.5 million people in Britain in the "high risk" category, but the virus can also be acquired by drug addicts sharing needles and through contaminated blood.

Dr. J. R. Harris, a consultant venereologist at St. Mary's Hospital in London, said that gay men were attending London clinics from as far afield as Wales to seek anonymity rather than go to their own GPs.

But the clinics were forced by budgetary restraints to send them back to their own GPs, who, confused by the DHSS guidelines, would not necessarily give them the vaccine.