

COUNCIL OF EUROPECommittee of Experts on Blood Transfusion and Immunohaematology

Informal report by Dr. H.H. Gunson on the proceedings of the 6th meeting, held in Lisbon, 16th-19th May, 1983.

1) Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS)

There is no doubt that this subject dominated the meeting and a report is to be submitted to meeting of ministers in June, 1983.

AIDS is a newly observed syndrome which leads to an impairment of the body's immune system and leaves affected individuals susceptible to certain types of cancer and a number of infections. Since June, 1981, approximately 1300 cases of AIDS have been reported to the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) in the U.S.A. The disease has been found principally in sexually active male homosexuals (70-80 per cent of all cases), but it has also been detected in male or female heterosexuals, 60 per cent of whom admit to intravenous drug abuse. A number of children have also been found to be suffering from an AIDS-like syndrome and a high proportion of these children are the offspring of mothers admitting drug abuse. Two ethnic groups also suffer an increased incidence of AIDS, viz; Haitians and people from Central Africa (Tchad and Zaire). Such persons are not usually homosexuals and the disease may affect both males and females. The disease carries a high mortality rate.

Prior to the meeting of the Committee of Experts in Lisbon, members were asked to send information on the incidence of AIDS in their Country, and this report was discussed. Within the European Countries, with one exception, there were less than 10 cases of AIDS reported from each Country. The exception was Belgium where 15 cases have been found and interestingly 13 of the individuals were nationals of Zaire. Of the other two, one was a native of Tchad and the other was Greek but had lived in Zaire.

The significance of AIDS to the Committee was in relation to the effects with respect to the transfusion of blood and blood products, particularly with coagulation factor concentrates given to patients suffering from haemophilia. Absolute proof that AIDS is caused by a transmissible infectious agent is not yet available, but the consensus in the Committee was that it should be regarded as such and that a recommendation should be made to the Council of Ministers at the meeting in June to take necessary steps to minimize the transmission of AIDS by the transfusion of blood products. Since there is no specific test which can be used to detect potential carriers, the recommendations have to be general. These will be as follows:

- (1) To avoid the use of coagulation factors prepared from large plasma pools except when such a product is specifically indicated for medical reasons;

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this is especially important for those Countries where self-sufficiency of such products has not been achieved.

- (2) To inform physicians and selected recipients, such as haemophiliacs of the potential health hazards of haemotherapy and the possibilities of minimising these risks.
- (3) To provide all donors with information on AIDS so that those in high-risk groups will refrain from donating (an example will be attached of the American Red Cross leaflet on this subject).
- (4) To pursue rapid and full implementation of the recommendations in R(80)5 and R(81)14. These refer to the need to attain self-sufficiency in blood product production, national services from voluntary, non-remunerated donors and the risks entailed from importation of foreign plasma products respectively.

With respect to England and Wales, recommendation (4) is in the process of implementation with the rebuilding of the Blood Products Laboratory, but this will not be an effective production unit until 1986. To fully implement (1) will in my view cause problems, since this basically means the use of small pools of plasma for coagulation factor production and this will cause logistic problems and possibly also practical ones with respect to the capability of the present B.P.L. to produce such material. Freeze-dried cryoprecipitate is a standard product in many European Countries, but is prepared in Centres who do not have regulatory authorities controlling good manufacturing processes to the same degree as in the U.K. The claims for higher yields of this material are not as impressive when quality control tests on each batch prepared from pools of 8-10 litres plasma. With respect to the importation of plasma products, particularly from the U.S.A., I find it difficult to believe that these can be phased out in the near future, since the Haemophilia Directors have always maintained that they require up to 100 per cent more Factor VIII for the treatment of haemophilia than can be produced from B.P.L. No doubt the opinion of the C.B.L.A. will be sought on these aspects.

Steps are in hand to attempt to reduce the risk of bleeding donors who may have AIDS by selective questioning before donation. We have considered the preparation of a leaflet to inform donors about AIDS, but the consensus has been to hold this in reserve for the present. Perhaps further consideration should be given to this matter.

It is important, I think to avoid "emotive over-reaction" amongst recipients, a phrase which will also appear in the recommendations.

- (4) Because of the association of high titres of antibodies to CMV in persons suffering from AIDS it was suggested that specific immunoglobulins for anti-CMV might be replaced by normal human immunoglobulin for intravenous use. It is not known whether immunoglobulin could transmit AIDS and there is no evidence that it has done so at present, but since anti-CMV immunoglobulin will be given mainly to patients undergoing transplantation whose immune responses are depressed by drugs, a cautious approach was advised. I think we will have to consider this matter very carefully.

As will be evident from the above, the implications of AIDS in various aspects of blood transfusion practice kept appearing. Undoubtedly it is an important disease with a high mortality rate which has attracted considerable press publicity. Whilst it has not yet reached the proportions in Europe as it has in the U.S.A. many members of the Committee considered that we may be seeing

the beginnings of a problem which could escalate if appropriate steps are not taken now.