

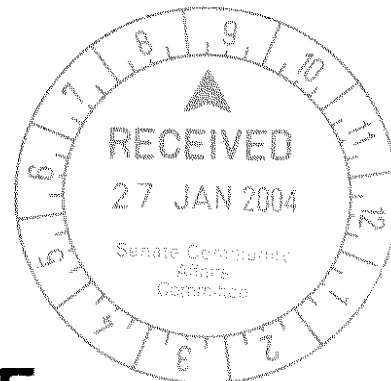
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23 January 2004



SUBMISSION TO AUSTRALIAN SENATE

Inquiry into Hepatitis C and Blood Supply in Australia

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FOREWORD

Blood is life. In transfusions it saves millions of lives every year. Blood also provides plasma - a precious liquid used in the manufacture of various medical products that are indispensable, particularly for haemophiliacs.

But between 1980 and 1988 the lifesaving act became synonymous with death throughout the world; 30,000 haemophiliacs and tens of thousands of transfusion recipients were victims of blood that was infected with the Hepatitis C and HIV viruses.

This is the blood scandal.

A single product requires the blood of thousands of donors yet a single sick donor is enough to contaminate everything.

In the USA, Canada, Japan, Germany and France, the contaminated blood affair was the biggest medical catastrophe of the century.

Cynicism of blood industrialists, incompetence, negligence, corruption and blindness of certain governments and certain sections of the medical profession, the catastrophe is still with us — men, women and children are dying every single day.¹

¹ *"A Blood Scandal"* [2000], SBS TV, telecast 12 June 2001

ONGOING SCANDAL

Tainted blood represents one of the worst medical disasters in Australian history. Over the years **Medical Error Action Group** has received enquiries from victims of contaminated blood right across Australia and over to New Zealand; the latter having received contaminated blood in Australia. Enquiries in the form of desperate cries for help.

Like many medical failures, tainted blood has not been properly addressed by health authorities. The contamination of the blood supply by the Hepatitis C virus in particular, has not only been largely ignored, it has been subject to a cover up.

The **Australian Red Cross Blood Service** has been very adept at using public relations 'spin' in order to down play the Hepatitis C disaster. Employing an in-house public relations department as well as external spin doctors to assist it in this process. The question that this poses is simple:

- **Australian Red Cross Blood Service** is primarily funded by the taxpayer, so why are we paying twice for their public relations bill?
- Why is there a need to employ two sets of public relations consultants?
- What do they have to hide?
- Could it be that the Hepatitis C disaster is something that the blood service would rather the taxpayer fund to cover up, than to offer much needed assistance to victims of this appalling tragedy?

The **Australian Red Cross Blood Service** has veered away from its humanitarian principles. They have consigned the thousands of victims of contaminated blood into the past. But these people desperately need their support *now* because of *past* failures and the inadequate screening of blood. The Red Cross chooses to avoid assisting victims of the tainted blood disaster, primarily because it is of their own making.

There has been little compensation for victims of this disaster. They have received no apology. Their quality of life has been diminished. Many have seen their life expectancies cut short by the deadly virus Hepatitis C and consequential liver disease. The organisation, the **Australian Red Cross Blood Service**, however, has continued to grow and with it, so too has the cost to the public purse. The executives of the blood service receive staggering incomes. But they are also guilty of making staggering financial mistakes.

WASTED RESOURCES

A computerized blood management system called "**Progesa**" was due to commence four years ago at a cost to the taxpayer of \$4 million. In 2004, the *Progesa* system has been delayed indefinitely and its budget has blown out to an unbelievable \$38 million. This computerized blood management system is to Australian Red Cross Blood Service what the 'Collins class submarine' was to the Royal Australian Navy - an expensive failure and a debacle. It now looks likely that the *Progesa* system will be scrapped with close to \$40 million down the drain. \$40 million that could have been allocated towards saving the lives of the thousands of victims of Hepatitis C contaminated blood.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

There have been so many missed opportunities to assist tainted blood victims. There have been so many occasions where the issue of blood contaminated by Hepatitis C could have been addressed. Yet internal government investigations have come and gone. All have avoided the central issue of Hepatitis C and the blood supply. Typical of this scenario was the federal government's investigation in 2003 known as the "**Expert Advisory Group into Hepatitis C and Plasma 1990**".

The inquiry, chaired by Professor Bruce Barraclough (also chair of the Australian Council for Safety & Quality in Health Care), failed to interview key witnesses and failed to address key evidence submitted to it.

WORKINGS OF "THE CROSS"

In a farcical turn of events last year, the head of victims' support group, known as **Tainted Blood Product Action Group**, was dragged through the courts as a result of evidence he gave to the inquiry. The legal action against him took the shape of a contempt of court motion, instigated by the **Australian Red Cross Blood Service** (the motion failed - transcript of hearing making requisite reading by the Senate Inquiry). What is of concern is that this came immediately after submitting evidence to Professor Barraclough and *before* Barraclough had even tabled the final report of his inquiry to the federal Minister for Health and Ageing and Parliament. This led to victims describing Professor Barraclough as a "white washer" and someone of poor judgment lacking integrity.

Certainly Barraclough's conduct in this episode was definitely not that of an independent arbiter. Consequently victims withdrew from making submissions for fear of violation of their submission and privacy.

WHITE-WASH

What came of Professor Barraclough's final report reflected victims' worst fears. It was a white-wash. Once again the central issue of Hepatitis C in the blood supply was not properly addressed. Victims' rights to a proper investigation and financial compensation were ignored.

OVERSEAS

Britain, Ireland, Canada, Italy, Hungary, Spain and Sweden have all offered compensation to victims of their respective tainted blood tragedies. Yet Australia has no national tainted blood compensation scheme in place.

Thankfully the Australian Senate Inquiry into **Hepatitis C and Blood Supply In Australia** represents a milestone in the Australian tainted blood tragedy. It is the first time victims have been afforded an opportunity to speak openly about their experiences, without fear of prosecution or intimidation or humiliation from the Australian Red Cross.

SENATE INQUIRY

It is the hope of **Medical Error Action Group** that the Australian Senate makes the right decisions on this matter. That it offers victims and their loved ones an opportunity to try and live out the remainder of their lives with some dignity; a dignity that is borne out of understanding, compassion, improved health care and appropriate financial compensation where it is desperately needed.

By compensating victims adequately, government would be meeting its humanitarian obligations inherent in the social contract.

Make no mistake, people infected with the Hepatitis C virus are sick.

Tainted blood is a scandal of world-wide proportions. Government must fulfil its public safety management transparently and acknowledging this scandal, like the aforementioned countries have, will go some way to removing this ugly blood stain on Australia's humanitarian record.

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Lorraine Long
Founder
Medical Error Action Group

Sydney
23 January 2004