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TAINTED BLOOD SCANDAL



Action stations

IF THE government was hoping its plans for a public inquiry into the NHS contaminated blood disaster would head off legal action by haemophiliac victims and bereaved relatives, it was in for a high court shock.

Judge Barbara Fontaine paved the way for more than 500 claimants to mount a group action over the fatal and debilitating HIV and hepatitis C diseases caused by imported US blood products in the 1970s and 80s. Some were infected long after concerns were first raised.

The judge dismissed an application by lawyers for the Department for Health to delay the "premature" proceedings on the grounds that the terms and scope of the inquiry were yet to be decided – and that some victims would face legal obstacles in reopening claims settled back in the 1990s.

Victims who were already seriously ill with HIV were cynically forced to sign "waivers" agreeing not to sue over that or any other subsequent illnesses, in return for miserly ex-gratia payments. They had no reason to believe then that they had already been infected with another deadly disease, hepatitis C, but documents later unearthed showed the government did know. Not only were the risks known, but some victims had even been secretly tested.

Nearly half the 5,000 haemophiliacs sentenced to protracted ill health from the blood products (harvested from drug addicts and prison inmates in the US) have already died. After hearing Steven Snowden QC, on behalf of the victims, argue that the case should go ahead while those with medical evidence were "still alive and still able to give evidence", the judge ruled: "It would not be sensible to delay further."

It's a bittersweet victory for the relatives of those who have already died and for the seriously ill victims whose lives, careers and families have been wrecked.

taintedblood
SEEKING JUSTICE FOR LIVES DESTROYED BY NHS BLOOD PRODUCTS

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