

## FDA bans blood donation by people who have lived in UK

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has imposed a ban on blood donations from anyone who has spent more than six months in Britain from 1980 to 1997 because of the possible risk of transmitting the human form of bovine spongiform encephalopathy, known as variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD).

The exclusion dates coincide with the time when exposure to CJD was considered to be at its peak in the United Kingdom. The American Red Cross estimates that the ban will cut US blood donations by 2.2% at a time when experts are already predicting severe nationwide blood shortages.

Variant CJD has affected about 40 people in the world, including 39 in Britain. It has never been transmitted through the blood except during experiments in which it was injected into the brains of mice. But the FDA said that it was concerned that scientists have not fully ascertained how the disease is spread.

People who made limited visits to Britain will not be affected

by the ban. But people who visited repeatedly between 1980 and 1997 will have to add up their trips to see if they are under the six month limit. The ban also applies to people of other nationalities who may have lived in Britain during the time in question. The FDA estimates that up to 250 000 donors could be affected by the new regulations.

Canadians who have spent at least six months in the United

Kingdom between 1980 and 1996 have also been banned from donating blood. The Canadian authorities have given the Canadian Blood Service, and its Quebec counterpart, until February 2000 to start screening donors. Quebec's blood agency, Hama-Quebec, has stepped up the ban to affect anyone who has spent just one month in the United Kingdom since 1980.

The Japanese health ministry issued a statement that said it was considering imposing a similar ban. According to the ministry, a committee has been discussing the issue for several months but has yet to reach a decision. □



US blood donation: time spent in UK will bar many donors

## Hepatitis C infects almost 2% of US population

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

Almost 2% of the population in the United States is infected with hepatitis C, according to a new comprehensive national report, making the virus the most common chronic blood borne infection in the country.

The report was based on data gathered through the third national health and nutrition examination survey (NHANES III), a government programme that surveyed 40 000 people throughout the United States from 1988 to 1994. According to the report, about 3.9 million Americans are infected with the hepatitis C virus, making the

overall prevalence of people with antibodies to hepatitis C 1.8%. The estimated prevalence in the United Kingdom is just under 1%. Seventy four per cent of subjects were positive for hepatitis C virus RNA, indicating that an estimated 2.7 million people are chronically infected.

Among subjects aged 17 to 59 years the strongest factors independently associated with hepatitis C virus infection were use of illegal drugs and high risk sexual behaviour. Other factors independently associated with infection included poverty, having had 12 or fewer years of education, and having been divorced or separated. Neither sex nor racial or ethnic group was independently associated with infection (*New England Journal of Medicine* 1999;341:556-62).

According to the report, between 8000 and 10 000 deaths occur each year from liver complications associated

with hepatitis C, and this may triple by 2015 unless better treatments are developed.

People who had had more than 50 sexual partners were over 10 times as likely to be infected as someone who had had a single partner. Higher rates of infection were also associated with those who had sexual intercourse before the age of 18.

Dr Richard Kaslow, one of the authors of the report and currently professor of epidemiology and medicine at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, said: "We don't think sexual transmission has been as frequent as alternative routes, such as needle injection, transfusion, and other types of blood exposure. But that may have already changed in recent years as screening of donated blood eliminated transfusion as a source, and the use of injection drugs declined among the population who still may be sexually active." □

## Report calls for elimination of tuberculosis in the US by 2010

James Ciment *New York*

Ten years after issuing its "Strategic plan for the elimination of tuberculosis in the United States," the Advisory Council for the Elimination of Tuberculosis has revisited the topic with a new report calling for "new and improved diagnostic, treatment and prevention methods, including a new vaccine."

The new report, *Tuberculosis Elimination Revisited: Obstacles, Opportunities, and a Renewed Commitment*, is upbeat in tone, coming on the heels of seven years of declining numbers of tuberculosis cases. As the report catalogues, the number of cases reported annually in the United States dropped from 84 304 in 1953 to 22 201 in 1985 but then climbed to 26 673 in 1992. In 1998, the number fell to a record low of 18 361 (6.8 per 100 000).

This recent progress, the current report suggests, came from a 15-fold increase in spending—from \$5m (£3m) to \$75m—on tuberculosis research after the release of the 1989 report. The new report says that the United States should set a goal of 3.5 cases per 100 000 by the year 2000 and an "elimination" rate of less than one case per million by 2010. □

### Corrections

*Cardiac surgery audit raises concern over equity of access*

The lower graph illustrating this article (31 July, p 277) did not show what the title suggested. It was, instead, a repeat of the upper graph and should not have been published.

*Gulf war leaves legacy of cancer*

In this news story (14 August, p 401) we published a picture of a "boy with unknown skin disease thought to be linked with use of depleted uranium." This caption was incorrect. We received several electronic responses ([www.bmj.com/cgi/eletters/319/7207/401/a](http://www.bmj.com/cgi/eletters/319/7207/401/a)) pointing out that this disease is dystrophic epidermolysis bullosa.