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Your Ref:

Our Ref: SUB-1275-2021

Date: 6 December 2021

INFECTED BLOOD PAYMENT SCHEME NI – CONSULTATION ON ENHANCED FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR HEPATITIS C STAGE 1

A public inquiry chaired by Sir Brian Langstaff is continuing to examine the circumstances in which men, women and children treated by the NHS in the UK were given contaminated blood and blood products. The Inquiry's terms of reference include investigating the adequacy of financial support available. Sir Brian has highlighted the disparity of financial support across the UK and made clear his expectation that action should be taken to address this before the conclusion of the Inquiry.

On 25 March 2021, as part of a UK wide ministerial parity agreement¹, I announced plans² to introduce enhanced financial support for hepatitis C stage 1 beneficiaries on the NI Infected Blood Payment Scheme (NI Scheme). This additional financial support, which is known as the Special Category Mechanism (SCM) in England, enhanced Hep C + in Wales and the 'severely impacted' category in Scotland, is intended to benefit hepatitis C stage 1 beneficiaries who consider their infection or its treatment to have a substantial and long-term adverse impact on their ability to carry out routine daily activities.

The NI Scheme is the only scheme in the UK that does not currently provide enhanced support and in order to achieve *'greater parity'*, I have committed to the introduction of enhanced support payments for eligible hepatitis C stage 1 scheme beneficiaries, in line with the same rates paid in England, to be backdated to 1 April 2019. This is subject to a model for assessment of eligibility being developed.

Across the other UK infected blood support schemes, there are different methods for assessing eligibility for this additional financial support and this has been highlighted, and indeed is being examined, by the Infected Blood Public Inquiry. I have therefore committed to consulting with all relevant stakeholders to explore the most appropriate model for the NI Scheme.

¹ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2021-03-25/hcws895>

² www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/official-reports/written-ministerial-statements/2020-2021/bv137_wms_dh_250321_2.pdf

It is important that I hear the views of all those infected and or affected in NI, as well as health professionals who treat and care for patients with hepatitis C, in order to provide a broad evidence base. To support this consultation exercise, a working group was established which includes NI Scheme beneficiaries, both 'infected' and 'affected', representatives of the relevant haemophilia organisations (Haemophilia NI, Families and Friends of Haemophilia NI and the UK Haemophilia Society), the Business Services Organisation (BSO) which administers the NI Scheme and an independent clinician with knowledge of the conditions associated with hepatitis C. The working group provides valuable assistance in understanding the potential impact of the reforms on the communities affected by them.

In order to explore options for a model for assessment of eligibility, I am keen to hear your views and have attached a short questionnaire which has been developed in partnership with our working group. The consultation document contains supporting materials such as a comparison paper outlining the different processes in place in the other UK regions.

I would be very grateful if you would take the time to consider and respond to all of the questions and I invite you to express your views in full and include any additional suggestions you would like to be taken into consideration. You are welcome to attach supplementary supporting information you feel may be relevant to this exercise, however I would ask that you restrict this to no more than one side of an A4 page (or the equivalent) to allow the results of the survey to be analysed promptly. It is also important that you do not include any personal information, unless you are responding in a professional capacity or on behalf of an organisation.

The questionnaire is available at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/consultations/infected-blood-payment-scheme-ni-consultation-enhanced-support-hepatitis-c-stage-1> and you have until 5 January 2022 to respond.

Alternatively you may complete the questionnaire and respond by email or in writing - copies of the document are available on request from the Infected Blood Inquiry Team at ibit@health-ni.gov.uk or by calling 028 9052 0728. Responses should be returned by email to ibit@health-ni.gov.uk, or by post to:

Infected Blood Inquiry Team
Health Protection Branch
Department of Health
Room C4.22, Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
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Departmental policy officials, with support from statisticians, will collate and analyse all responses and with support from the working group will develop options and recommendations for my decision on the way forward.

This is an important opportunity for you to share your insights and views to help ensure we get this right and that those stage 1 beneficiaries who are in need of additional financial help receive the support they need.

Thank you in advance for your support and I look forward to seeing your responses.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Robin Swann', written in a cursive style.

Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health