

The Infected Blood Scandal: A Shocking Window Into the Pharmaceutical ‘Business with Disease’

By [Paul Anthony Taylor](#)

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Between the 1970s and early 1990s, over 30,000 patients in the UK were treated with blood transfusions or blood-derived products contaminated with HIV or hepatitis C. This led to more than 3,000 deaths and left thousands of people with ongoing health problems. A new [report](#) has concluded that UK authorities deliberately covered up and downplayed the scandal for decades, with drug companies such as Bayer and Armour Pharmaceuticals [accused](#) of knowing treatments were infected but continuing to sell them anyway. The scandal provides a shocking window into the profit-driven nature of the pharmaceutical ‘[business with disease](#).’

The problem began when, during the 1970s, the UK’s National Health Service (NHS) was unable to meet the demand for blood and blood-derived products. As a result, products were imported into the UK from the United States and other countries where paid blood donors were used. These donors included prisoners and drug addicts at high risk of being infected with HIV or hepatitis C. Routine screening for HIV in blood and blood products didn’t begin in the UK until 1985, with screening for hepatitis C starting in 1991.

People with hemophilia and other clotting disorders were significantly impacted by the scandal as they received treatments made from large batches of contaminated blood plasma. Inevitably, therefore, infected individuals sometimes unknowingly passed on HIV or hepatitis C to their partners. Despite the growing number of victims, for many years the NHS and successive British governments refused to accept that any wrong had been done. In reality, however, the UK was one of the last developed countries to start screening blood for hepatitis C. It had also delayed the introduction of heat treatment for blood products to eliminate HIV. Clearly, therefore, while UK authorities have long pretended otherwise, the scandal was not an accident.

“A Day of Shame for the British State”

Following many years of tireless campaigning by those affected, the then UK Prime Minister Theresa May finally announced a public statutory inquiry in July 2017. Chaired by a former High Court judge, it aimed to examine why people were given infected blood and blood products, the impact on families, the authorities’ response, the support provided, questions of consent, and whether there was a cover-up. Evidence was collected between summer 2018 and February 2023.

The inquiry published two interim reports. The [first one](#) was released in July 2022 and recommended interim payments of at least £100,000 (\$127,000) to victims. The UK government accepted this recommendation, and payments were made in October 2022. The [second interim report](#), published in April 2023, recommended extending interim payments to bereaved parents, children, or siblings of infected individuals, and establishing a full compensation scheme.

The [final report](#), published on 20 May 2024 in seven volumes, identifies systemic, collective, and individual failures in managing the risk of infections from blood products and responding to the consequences of the scandal. Its many recommendations include the immediate establishment of a compensation scheme, a formal apology, and, towards identifying undiagnosed cases, the routine questioning of new patients about pre-1996 blood transfusions.

Speaking in the UK parliament immediately after publication of the final report, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak called it “a day of shame for the British state” and said he wanted to make “a wholehearted and unequivocal apology for this terrible injustice.” Acknowledging that there had been an attempted cover-up of the scandal, including the loss and destruction of key documents, he committed to implementing the report’s compensation recommendations.

Two days later, however, on 22 May 2024, Sunak suddenly and unexpectedly called a general election, to be held on 4 July 2024. With his party widely predicted to lose this, it will seemingly now be left to Sunak’s successor to ensure the report’s many recommendations are fully implemented.

Drug Firms Knowingly Sold Infected Blood Products

The roles of drug companies Bayer and Armour Pharmaceuticals in the scandal are particularly shocking. The UK’s *Daily Telegraph* newspaper has [described](#) how, rather than withdrawing the infected blood products as soon as they realized what had happened, both companies deliberately continued selling them so as to avoid reducing their profits. Bayer’s marketing plan reportedly even outlined how it would dump the drugs in countries including Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, and Australia.

Despite the reckless greed they exhibited, no lawsuits have ever been brought in the UK against either of these drug firms. For now, therefore, as is also the case with the COVID-19 vaccine scandal, any compensation payments to victims will likely be funded by British taxpayers. Estimates suggest the total cost of these could eventually reach £10 billion (\$12.7 billion). Sir Brian Longstaff, who chaired the inquiry, says the scandal has destroyed “lives, dreams, friendships, families, and finances,” adding that the number of deaths is still increasing. His words provide a sobering reminder of why the pharmaceutical [‘business with](#)

[disease](#)' must urgently now be brought to an end.

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[Executive Director of the Dr. Rath Health Foundation and one of the coauthors of our explosive book, "The Nazi Roots of the 'Brussels EU'", Paul](#) is also our expert on the Codex Alimentarius Commission and has had eye-witness experience, as an official observer delegate, at its meetings. You can find Paul on Twitter at [@paulanthtaylor](#)

He is a regular contributor to Global Research.

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