

China is urged to compensate people infected with HIV through illegal blood selling

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The Chinese government has been urged to set up a compensation fund for the victims of an illegal blood selling scandal that resulted in thousands of people in central China in the 1990s being infected with HIV. A new report calls for a full and independent investigation into the number of people affected and an official apology to the people affected as well as compensation.

The report, jointly published by the Korekata AIDS Law Center in Beijing and the US based non-governmental organisation Asia Catalyst, describes the plight of impoverished farmers who donated blood to commercial blood collection centres across central China. The blood was often pooled for centrifugal fractionation, and donors were then re-injected with blood to reduce the risk of anaemia and were encouraged to donate more often. HIV tainted blood products were distributed through the healthcare system, creating another route of primary infection. There was also widespread secondary infection to the children and sexual partners of donors.

Although by 1995 HIV infection through paid blood donation had come to light, the authorities did not act to regulate blood donation until 2005, says Li Dan, founder of the Korekata centre. "They knew there was a problem, but they ignored it. From 1996 to 2004 they didn't officially inform the victims that they had been infected with HIV."

A 2007 Ministry of Health report put the number of people infected with HIV as a result of receiving illegal blood or tainted blood infusions and still alive at 65 100, but Mr Li puts the figure at closer to 100 000, 10% of the original number infected (primary and secondary infections).

The report is based on case notes from Korekata's files and interviews with HIV experts and 31 victims. The report found that of these 31 people "26 were in critical health and had sought medical care from multiple clinics before finally discovering

they were HIV-positive. Some victims found out they were HIV-positive so late that they were unable to obtain timely treatment, and died as a result."

Efforts to obtain redress through the legal system have been largely fruitless, the report states.

One interviewee, surnamed Zhao, from Henan province, said in the report, "We managed to find the invoice from the blood transfusion we had back when we stayed in the hospital, the medical certificate, and the hospital discharge certificate, but the People's Court wouldn't hear our case. We wish the government would give people living with HIV/AIDS their right to sue and that the courts will give us fair compensation."

The report was funded by UNAIDS, the joint United Nations programme on HIV and AIDS. Mark Stirling, UNAIDS' country coordinator for China, said, "UNAIDS supports efforts to establish a national mechanism to provide compensation to persons infected with HIV through transfusion of contaminated blood products in China in a standardised and transparent manner."

The release of the report coincides with the annual meeting of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, where legislators will review proposals for a compensation fund for infected people and an insurance fund for future blood donations. "UNAIDS hopes that careful consideration will be given to these proposals and that steps will be taken to implement the recommendations set out within them," Mr Stirling told the *BMJ*.

China's Blood Disaster: The Way Forward is at www.asiacatalyst.org/Compensation_report.pdf.

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