

FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Máinnystrie O Poustie

www.health-ni.gov.uk

Mr Simon Hamilton
Chair
Haemophila NI

singlesculler50@gmail.com

Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
BELFAST, BT4 3SQ
Tel: 028 9052 2556
Email: private.office@health-ni.gov.uk

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Dear *Simon,*

Review of the Northern Ireland Infected Blood Payment Scheme – update

When I took up post as Minister of Health in January last year, the issue of support for all of those who have been impacted by infected blood was an immediate priority for me.

I stated my intention to carry out a three phased approach to reforming the Northern Ireland (NI) Infected Blood Payment Scheme to ensure it best meets the needs of all beneficiaries. Phase 1 addressed the immediate difference that arose in 2019/20 between the rates paid to Northern Ireland scheme beneficiaries when compared with those in England. I announced payments in January and March 2020 that ensured infected beneficiaries on the NI scheme were no worse off in terms of financial support on the scheme than their counterparts in England for the 2019/20 financial year. In addition, I also announced payments for non-infected widows and widowers on the NI Scheme. I was keen to maintain this momentum and to build on this progress.

The COVID-19 pandemic will no doubt have caused additional anxiety to those affected by contaminated blood and in order to help alleviate any further suffering, in August 2020 I introduced a permanent uplift in annual financial support to infected beneficiaries in Northern Ireland, raising payments to the same level as rates paid in England. I considered this to be a first step in phase 2 of my review of the NI scheme and it is my sincere hope that this increased financial support, representing an additional annual funding commitment of £1.1 million by my Department, provides longer term financial security for the people that you represent.

Phase 2 of the review of the NI Scheme is continuing and as I said when I met with you last year, I wanted to involve beneficiaries of the scheme in this work. As you are aware in the Autumn of 2020, I commissioned a survey seeking the views of all beneficiaries, on the support currently provided on the Scheme and how that might be improved. I have attached for your information the report of the findings of the survey, which will be published on the DoH website.

I am very grateful to all of those who responded and while I had hoped for a greater response rate to the survey, I fully understand and respect the individual wishes of those who may have chosen not to take part for a variety of reasons.

As well as meeting with those affected by contaminated blood, I have received many letters from those bereaved as a result of their spouse or partner receiving contaminated blood and I am aware of how they too have suffered. They have told me how they have had to make sacrifices throughout their lives and that they have felt overlooked in the past and left to struggle financially after their loved ones passed away.

Taking this into consideration, along with the findings of the survey, and having looked at the support available in other regions of the UK, I have decided to introduce annual financial support for non-infected bereaved spouses and partners. These payments will be 75% of the annual payment that the beneficiary's late spouse or partner would have received. The payments will be backdated to 1 April 2020 and will continue into future years, rising annually with inflation. A bereaved beneficiary currently in receipt of only the winter fuel payment of £540 will now receive £13,539 annually. At the other end of the scale, a widow/widower whose late spouse would have been entitled to the Hepatitis C and HIV co-infected payment will see their financial support increase from the £540 winter fuel payment to £33,561 annually.

I have decided that non-infected bereaved beneficiaries who are in receipt of income top-ups will receive their income top-up for this year, in addition to the new annual payment referenced above. Income top-ups will then cease from 1 April 2021 as a result of the introduction of this increased and ongoing financial support and in line with my decision to cease income top-ups for infected beneficiaries following the uplift in payments I introduced in August 2020. For bereaved individuals who were in receipt of income top ups, the net increase in annual financial support ranges from just under £14,000 to just over £28,000. In addition to the new payments, non-infected bereaved beneficiaries will continue to receive the £540 winter fuel allowance.

All those eligible on the NI scheme will shortly receive a letter from the BSO detailing their new payments

I hope that this increased financial support will provide longer term financial security to those who have been left bereaved as a result of infected blood, as well as recognising that they too have suffered tremendously as a result of their loved one receiving contaminated blood.

As I have previously stated, I remain committed to doing everything I can to ensure your community gets the support it needs and deserves. As phase 2 of the Review continues, I am committed to looking at other areas where reform may be required as I want to give fair and equal consideration to the needs of all who have suffered as a result of infected blood, recognising the devastating impact this has had on their lives.

Yours sincerely



Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health

cc Mr Nigel Hamilton - nigelphamilton@yahoo.co.uk