

FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Máinnystrie O Poustie

www.health-ni.gov.uk

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Chair
Haemophila NI

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Dear *Simon,*

You will be aware that on taking up post as Health Minister in January 2020, I announced a Review of the Northern Ireland Infected Blood Payment Scheme. This work has continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and to date, I have introduced reforms which have brought payment levels for infected beneficiaries in Northern Ireland back into line with their counterparts in England and I have announced annual financial support to non-infected bereaved spouses and partners on the NI Scheme.

Alongside the NI Review, my Department has also been working closely since April 2019 with the Cabinet Office and Health Departments in England, Scotland and Wales to explore how to achieve greater parity of support across the four UK infected blood schemes, while recognising that the integrity of the schemes developed under devolution should be respected and to ensure that any reform would not leave a beneficiary worse off than their counterpart in another part of the UK.

As a result of this dialogue, I have agreed to implement a number of changes to the NI Infected Blood Payment Scheme, which are intended to achieve greater alignment in financial support across the UK schemes. The reforms are as follows:

- payments for non-infected bereaved spouses or partners will increase from 75% of the deceased beneficiary's annual payment to an automatic 100% of the deceased beneficiary's payment in the first year, with 75% payable in subsequent years. This is in line with the policy in Scotland and will be backdated to 1 April 2019, meaning arrears of 100% will be paid to all eligible beneficiaries in NI for the 2019/20 financial year.
- the introduction of enhanced support payments for eligible Hepatitis C Stage 1 beneficiaries, in line with rates paid in England and backdated to 1 April 2019. Northern Ireland currently does not provide this financial support on the Scheme and work will now be taken forward to develop a model for eligibility assessment, in consultation with all stakeholders;

- the £10,000 bereavement lump sum, which has been provided since the NI Scheme was established in 2017, will also now be payable to the Estate of the deceased in cases where there is no living spouse or partner, in line with the position in England and Wales. This will be backdated to 1 April 2017, meaning all eligible beneficiaries currently registered on the Scheme will receive the appropriate payment in arrears;
- the lump sum payment to a Hepatitis C Stage1 beneficiary will increase from £20,000 to £50,000, with the additional £20,000 payable if a stage 1 beneficiary moves to stage 2. The total lump sum payable for Hepatitis C beneficiaries remains at £70,000. This policy is in line with the position in Scotland and will be backdated to 1 April 2017, meaning that all eligible beneficiaries currently registered with the Scheme will receive this additional payment in arrears;
- the lump sum payment to a HIV beneficiary will increase from the current range of payments up to maximum of £80.5k (depending on circumstances) to an automatic £80.5k, backdated to 1 April 2017, meaning all eligible beneficiaries currently registered with the Scheme will receive any appropriate additional payment in arrears subject to the lump sum amount previously received.

The Health Ministers in England, Scotland and Wales have also agreed to reforms to similarly adapt their respective schemes. I have also agreed with the other UK Health Ministers that any future changes to any scheme will require four nations' consultation.

These reforms, which I am announcing to the NI Assembly today, are the culmination of many months of discussions between the four UK nations and the UK Cabinet Office, to agree a package that would deliver the maximum level of parity of financial support to the greatest number of beneficiaries. I consider this to be a step toward UK parity, in line with the principle that no beneficiary in any scheme should be worse off than someone with the same diagnosis on another UK scheme.

The introduction of enhanced support for eligible Hepatitis C Stage 1 beneficiaries was the next area I had identified for priority reform as part of Phase 2 of the ongoing review of the NI Scheme, following consideration of the findings of the recent survey. My officials are making plans to meet with you as part of a consultation exercise to inform options for a process to assess eligibility for this additional level of support and will be in touch to arrange a meeting in due course.

All beneficiaries will continue to receive their current payments until the changes can be put in place. Please be assured that the Northern Ireland Review will continue and 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