

Deferral of blood donation from people who have been in the United Kingdom between 1980 and 1996

Australian Health Ministers have collectively agreed to defer, for an indefinite period, blood donations from Australians who have lived or travelled in the United Kingdom for a cumulative period of 6 months or more between 1980 and 1996. The announcement was made on 21 September 2000 and has attracted considerable media attention.

The period between 1980 and 1996 coincided with the epidemic of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) in the United Kingdom. Consumption of meat infected with the BSE agent is thought to be the cause of variant Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease (vCJD) which was first reported in the UK in 1996.

There have been no cases of vCJD in Australia and no cases of vCJD associated with blood transfusion reported anywhere in the world. However, in light of recent evidence that BSE may be experimentally transferred by blood in sheep, the Donor Deferral Working Party recommended to Australian Health Ministers that, as a precautionary measure, action be taken to defer donors who may have been exposed to BSE when living or travelling in the UK.

This action is in line with other countries such as the USA, Canada and New Zealand. As in these other countries, the deferral policy will be phased in over a period of 3 months, to avoid jeopardising the availability of blood through the sudden loss of up to 30,000 donors.

A Fact Sheet providing answers to commonly asked questions is available on the Internet at: www.health.gov.au/issues.htm. Copies of the Fact Sheet are also available to the general public via the free-call National Blood Information Line on telephone 1800 351 000.

Blood donors who would like more information should call the Australian Red Cross Blood Donor Information Line on telephone 131 495. Anyone, who is considering withdrawing as a donor in response to the reports in the media, is asked to contact their local Australian Red Cross Blood Service to discuss the issue before taking this step. The Australian Red Cross Blood Service will be writing to all blood donors shortly to provide them with more information.