

*Adjournment Debate*HEALTH—POSSIBLE TOXICITY OF BLOOD IMPORTED
FROM UNITED STATES

Mr. Dan McKenzie (Winnipeg South Centre): Mr. Speaker, I rise tonight to speak on a matter of the utmost urgency and importance. I refer to the use in Canadian laboratories of contaminated blood samples imported from the United States. Radio CJOB in Winnipeg brought this situation to light recently. These blood samples are used for testing the delicate equipment employed when exact tests are carried out on blood samples from Canadian patients.

At the University of Saskatchewan Hospital in Saskatoon, two laboratory technicians have died within the past year. Both deaths have been traced to infectious hepatitis. In both instances it is believed the disease was attributable to the presence of Australia antigen in imported commercial blood products. During the past year, five other technicians at the laboratory also contracted the disease. Fortunately, their symptoms were not fatal.

I have raised this serious matter in the House on several occasions. However, all my efforts to alert the minister appear to have been in vain. To date I have received no concrete assurances that anything at all has been done. On November 6 I asked the minister whether he was aware of the situation. He assured me that his department was aware of it and added that an investigation was under way. On November 22 the minister informed me in a letter that an investigation had been carried out, and said:

Certain blood fractions used for experimental or diagnostic purposes have on occasion been contaminated with hepatitis viruses. There is at present no foolproof way to test such products to ensure they are free from hepatitis viruses.

I was surprised when I read those words. The minister does not appear to be familiar with the modern tests for detecting hepatitis. I shall elaborate in a minute. On November 29 I asked the minister whether he intended to conduct an inquiry into the deaths, as requested by the University of Saskatchewan laboratory technicians. I was informed that the matter "now falls under the purview of the Saskatchewan government and there is no need for a special inquiry." These statements are difficult to understand, considering the fact that three weeks earlier the minister had assured me the federal Department of Health was investigating the matter.

The danger that blood products can be contaminated with Australia antigen has been known for some time. It is therefore surprising that there should be no federal legislation to deal with the hazard. The minister acknowledges the danger but appears unwilling to do anything about it. An article which appeared in the May 5, 1973, edition of the *Lancet*, a leading British medical journal, clearly spells out just how serious the situation has become. The article states that special tests of commercial blood products distributed by eight United States companies and one European company showed that 72 per cent were contaminated with the hepatitis B antigen. The article goes on to say, however:

Routine detection of the hepatitis B antigen has become possible, significantly assisting the clinical diagnosis.

However, in his letter of November 22 the minister stated, as I have mentioned, that there is no foolproof way to test blood products for hepatitis. It seems the minister

[Mr. MacDonald (Cardigan).]

may have been mistaken. According to the *Lancet*, techniques such as immune radiometry are currently being used with much effectiveness in detecting infectious hepatitis. It seems to me that if these techniques are available, the health department should perhaps familiarize itself with them. Although extremely tragic, the events at the University of Saskatchewan hospital should not be surprising, especially in view of the British findings. The situation is undoubtedly the same across the rest of Canada.

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As I mentioned earlier, practically none of these laboratory samples is manufactured in Canada. Instead, we are mainly dependent upon American sources of supply. Americans, like Canadians, are reluctant to sell their blood, even for a good price. The result is that the pool of professional blood donors includes a large number of drug addicts, the majority of whom probably carry infectious hepatitis.

If the Canadian government enacted federal legislation requiring that all laboratory blood products imported into Canada be tested and guaranteed free from hepatitis, problems would arise for the commercial manufacturers. If the drug addicts and others who carry infectious hepatitis had to be dropped from the pool of professional donors, then the price which would have to be paid to attract a sufficient number of donors would have to be increased very considerably. Since we are dealing with a multimillion dollar industry, you can expect some pretty powerful opposition if you attempt to get any Canadian federal legislation passed to deal with this matter.

The risk which lab workers face of contracting infectious hepatitis from blood specimens which they handle from patients would, of course, remain. But the over-all risk could be very substantially diminished if it could be guaranteed that the laboratory products which they have to use every day are free from infection. This can only be done through legislation similar to that recently passed in the United States. The law there now requires such testing and screening. It is also very important that a wholesale inventory is taken of existing supplies, should legislation be enacted. Existing stock in hospital and other laboratories should be tested or destroyed immediately. The minister must act to correct this serious situation.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marc Lalonde (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Mr. Speaker, it is with pleasure that I answer the hon. member concerning the important and serious problem he has raised.

I will mention first that the tragic deaths that occurred in Saskatchewan are events regretted by all authorities concerned. As I have already said to the hon. member, an investigation has been undertaken by the Saskatchewan government which has jurisdiction over the hospital and laboratories involved. There is nothing extraordinary nor unusual in this, for such investigations are regularly conducted by provincial governments, and it is appropriate to proceed in this manner.