

Statement by the National Blood Authority in relation to ABC's Australia Story on Historical Blood Infections

One in three Australians will need blood at some point in their life.

The National Blood Authority (NBA) manages the national supply of blood, blood products, blood-related products and services on behalf of all Australian governments. Its main objectives are to provide an adequate, safe, secure and affordable supply of blood, blood products, blood-related products and services; and to promote their safe and efficient use.

The National Blood Authority (NBA) was established on 1 July 2003 under the *National Blood Authority Act 2003*, following the National Blood Agreement signed by all Australian Health Ministers in 2002.

In the 1970s and 1980s, new viruses such as HIV and Hepatitis C emerged. At the time, nobody knew exactly what they were. Routine antibody testing for HIV of donated blood was introduced across Australia in 1985. Hepatitis C did not have a name when it was first identified; doctors called it non-A, non-B hepatitis, and it took some time to develop a reliable test.

For people with haemophilia and other bleeding disorders, blood products were the treatment that kept them alive. That is why many people, including children and young adults, were exposed. Doctors treating these patients had to make difficult decisions with the knowledge available at the time. Not treating them was not a real option.

The infections acquired from blood transfusions and blood products in this period were life-changing. People were inadvertently harmed. Some tragically died from the diseases they contracted. Others and their families are still gravely affected.

At that time, Australia's blood supply was managed separately by each state and territory. The exception was the ACT which commenced self-government in 1989. Between 1961 and 1991, Commonwealth Serum Laboratories (CSL) existed as a corporate Commonwealth entity. CSL's principal activities were the production and distribution of human pharmaceutical products and the manufacture of plasma products sourced from human blood. There was no national framework, no single blood service and no national safety oversight. The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) did not exist yet; it was not formed until the late 1980s.

Today, Australia's blood system looks vastly different to what it did in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s. The TGA now independently regulates the quality and safety of blood products and blood-related products. Australian Red Cross Lifeblood operates as a single national blood service, replacing the previous state and territory model. National evidence-based blood safety regulations are in place for testing and community education covering both donor and product safety. Our national systems monitor the supply from donation through to transfusion, tracking adverse events and emerging risks.

These safeguards cannot undo the harm done to people in the past. However, they are central to a safe and secure blood supply now.

Australia is recognized as having one of the safest blood supplies in the world. The National Blood Authority continues to work with governments, regulators, Lifeblood and industry to keep the supply safe, secure and responsive to new and emerging risks. That means scanning the horizon for threats, working closely with the TGA and Lifeblood, and reporting to all governments on what we find.

Many Australians will need blood during their lives. The National Blood Authority exists to ensure they can trust the blood supply when they need it.