



DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE
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FROM THE SECRETARY OF STATE

The Rt Hon Norman Fowler MP
Secretary of State for
Social Services
Alexander Fleming House
Elephant and Castle
London SE1 6BY

6 November 1985

Dear Secretary of State

AIDS

1. Sir James Gowans came to see me last Wednesday to tell me about AIDS; with Dr Acheson, he gave Sir David Hancock a similar briefing a week or two earlier. In particular Sir James described research on AIDS - what is being done and what needs to be done, distinctively by and for the UK - specifically the need for a national epidemiological surveillance centre.
2. In these matters the public health aspects are, of course, your responsibility and that of George Younger and Nicholas Edwards; and, on the related research, the MRC is one of our prime sources of advice (and performance). Against that background I drew these tentative conclusions from my briefing with Sir James:
 - (i) AIDS, in the UK, is a special, urgent national public health problem; there is a real possibility of its developing into a national emergency.
 - (ii) The situation in the UK is extremely unstable; present evidence suggests that the infected (and infectious) population is doubling every six months; and the cost of caring for new victims could double annually from a base of perhaps £40-80M next year.
 - (iii) The best working assumption for now must be that an effective vaccine is at least 5 years away.
 - (iv) Thus the best present prospects for curbing the spread of AIDS are through public health education coupled with an understanding of the UK epidemiology.

3. We need to match our response to the potential scale, urgency and uniqueness of the problem. I am not clear that collectively we have yet recognized the gravity of the situation and the potential costs of an inadequate response now. For its part, the MRC has decided - rightly in my view - to press ahead with establishing the UK epidemiological surveillance centre at a cost of £150,000 this year and £0.5m in 1986-87 and subsequent years. To do this, they will have to cut back disruptively on this year's other commitments and on their future plans. Other research of high priority will have to go and Sir James Gowans has reasonably asked me whether the MRC can look to the Government for additional resources for this work, which carries public health as well as research implications.

4. I know that your officials and particularly Dr Acheson, have been involved in drawing up plans for the centre. Clearly the Science Budget has a contribution to make and I am ready within my own resources to find £0.2m, a year from 1986-87 towards the cost of the centre. The nature of the disease gives this work a priority that goes beyond the intrinsic importance of the research. Given the importance of the public health aspects of the problem I very much hope that you together with George Younger and Nicholas Edwards would see your way between you to finding the balance. I recognise the £50,000 you have already agreed to contribute this year but in the face of what is a national public health emergency of gathering momentum there seems to me an overwhelming case for doing more.

5. I am copying this letter to all Cabinet Ministers, Sir Robert Armstrong and Sir Robin Nicholson.

Yours sincerely,

Robert Smith
Private Secretary

Approved by the
Secretary of State
and signed in his
absence

