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FCS/86/236

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH & SOCIAL SECURITY

AIDS

1. The Director General of the British Council has proposed that screening for AIDS be introduced for all overseas students entering this country under the Council's auspices. Since it is for your Department to determine what measures are necessary and practical in the interest of protecting public health, I would welcome your views on this proposal.

2. The British Council were right to identify the danger of public criticism if they were judged to have taken inadequate precautions over students coming under their auspices. But the issues involved are complex and sensitive. We must avoid any action which may expose us to unjustified allegations of discrimination or to a backlash that could be detrimental to our interests.

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3. Our attitude is likely to come under scrutiny at the meeting of Commonwealth Health Ministers in Nassau from 13-17 October. It would be best to reach a collective decision on screening before the Conference: failing that, we should take the initiative in describing what we are doing domestically in terms of health measures and public education, and we should encourage others to recognise that this is a problem which all members of the Commonwealth share. We should adopt a positive stance, drawing attention to the contribution we are making to the AIDS programme of the WHO, and encouraging other governments to cooperate with it.

4. The attitude of our Community partners will also be crucial. No meeting of Health Ministers of the Twelve is scheduled under our Presidency. But I believe that any decision on screening would be better defended if it were consistent with decisions taken by our partners.

5. We might also look at action in other fora. I know that the WHO Secretariat are opposed to screening. But there could be advantage in promoting an international and public exchange of views on the travel aspects of AIDS and on screening, under the auspices of the WHO. Any document which emerged from such a forum could provide useful support for whichever arguments we deploy domestically.

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6. I propose a meeting together with Douglas Hurd and Kenneth Baker. Meanwhile I think our senior officials might meet soon to prepare the ground.

7. I am copying this letter to the Prime Minister, Douglas Hurd and Kenneth Baker.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'G. Howe', written in a cursive style.

(GEOFFREY HOWE)

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

7 October 1986

