

# society for general Microbiology

## SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE CONSULTATION ON BLOOD TESTING FOLLOWING CRIMINAL INCIDENTS WHERE THERE IS A RISK OF INFECTION

EVIDENCE SUBMITTED BY THE SOCIETY FOR GENERAL MICROBIOLOGY  
(SGM)

The Society for General Microbiology, founded in 1945, is an independent professional scientific body dedicated to promoting the 'art and science' of microbiology. It has now established itself as one of the two major societies in the world in its field, with some 5500 members in the UK and abroad.

### General Comments

A major microbiological issue of this legislation is the pressure it may place on medical and infectious disease advisory staff. The decision to initiate post-exposure prophylaxis for HIV is not trivial and must be taken in the light of expert assessment of the risks involved (nature of exposure *versus* likelihood of infection). Present access to this expertise must be considered. Overall, the document seems to over-emphasise the very low risk of transmission of, in particular, HIV and hepatitis C, by the type of exposure likely to be sustained by police officers. The Society is not aware of large numbers of case reports world-wide of proven, rather than potential, transmission of blood-borne viruses to police officers in the course of their duties. A recent metanalysis (Risचितेल्लि, G. et al [2001]. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 20 (4), 299-306) failed to find an increased prevalence of hepatitis C infection in public safety workers, although there was evidence of increased hepatitis B.

### Specific comments

#### Section 1.6

In this section it is acknowledged that the only incidence of infection of a police officer as the result of contact with blood or body fluids was with hepatitis B. This would be expected, as the infectivity of hepatitis B is much greater than that of HIV or hepatitis C. There is an efficacious and safe vaccine for hepatitis B, so if a greater effort were made to immunise police officers, this risk would be largely removed. It also provides further support for a universal vaccination program against hepatitis B as recommended by the World Health Organization.

#### Section 1.10

Reference is made to "accessing suspect's medical records". Which medical records are these – the patient's GP's records, hospital records or police records? What efforts are made to ensure these records are up to date? Hepatitis B and C infections both can resolve spontaneously or in response to specific therapy such that the patient is no longer infectious.

Section 3.13

The testing policy used for when health care workers (HCWs) in hospital are exposed to blood or body fluids works extremely well for two reasons. Firstly, a realistic assessment of the likely risk to the HCW is performed. Secondly, testing is very rarely refused as a result of the sensitive way in which permission is sought.

Section 4.12

The practicalities of the timescale for obtaining results of testing need to be fully worked out. As the document says, PEP for HIV is best started within an hour of exposure. However, in this section, "within less than a week of the incident" is suggested as the timescale for the victim to find out the result. Would it be anticipated that the applicant would take HIV PEP for this time if the original risk assessment deemed it to be necessary?

As a footnote, if NHS laboratories are to be involved in this testing, there will need to be adequate funding and agreement obtained from laboratory staff to be available should any out of hours testing be required.

Question 10

SGM agrees that the result of mandatory testing should be available only to the applicant and should not be retained by the police. A practical reason for this is that test results are relevant only to the time at which they are performed. The infectivity status of the individual may well change in the future as the result of currently available or future therapy.

**Sources**

This evidence has been prepared on behalf of SGM by Dr Elizabeth McCrudden, University of Glasgow and the West of Scotland Specialist Virology Centre, and Professor James Neil, University of Glasgow.

**About the SGM**

SGM has over 600 members in Scotland, largely from universities, research institutions, health and veterinary services, government bodies and industry. The Society has a strong international following, with 25% of membership coming from outside the UK from some 60 countries.

The Society is a 'broad church'; its members are active in a wide range of aspects of microbiology, including medical and veterinary fields, environmental, agricultural and plant microbiology, food, water and industrial microbiology. Many members have specialized expertise in fields allied to microbiology, including biochemistry, molecular biology and genetics. The Society's membership includes distinguished, internationally-recognised experts in almost all fields of microbiology.

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Among its activities the Society publishes four high quality, widely-read research journals (*Microbiology*, *Journal of Medical Microbiology*, *Journal of General Virology* and *International Journal of Systematic and Evolutionary Microbiology*). It also publishes a highly respected quarterly magazine, *Microbiology Today*, of considerable general educational value. Each year the Society holds two major scientific meetings attended by up to 1500 microbiologists and covering a wide range of aspects of microbiology and virology research.

The governing Council of the SGM has a strong commitment to improving awareness of the critically important role of microbiology in many aspects of human health, wealth and welfare. It has in this connection recently initiated a 'Microbiology Awareness Campaign' aimed at providing information to the government, decision makers, education authorities, media and the public of the major contribution of microbiology to society.

An issue of major concern to the Society is the national shortage of experienced microbiologists, particularly in the field of clinical microbiology and in industry. To attempt to improve this situation long-term, the Society runs an active educational programme focused on encouraging the teaching of microbiology in university and college courses and in the school curriculum, including primary schools. Some 320 schools are corporate members of SGM.

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