

Hepatitis C Tainted Blood Class Action

News

"CTV News Staff

Advocates for victims of the tainted-blood scandal are hailing the criminal charges, but want Ottawa to expand its compensation packages to include all victims.

After a five-year investigation, the RCMP on Wednesday laid charges including negligence causing bodily harm against four doctors and two organizations, including the Canadian Red Cross.

Victims said the charges give new impetus for the federal government to expand its compensation program to include all victims, not just those people infected between 1986 and 1990.

"We hope now that the federal government will take a fresh look and do the responsible thing, compensate all of the victims regardless of when they were infected," David Klein, a lawyer working on a class-action hepatitis C lawsuit, told CTV's Canada AM in an interview.

Ottawa announced in 1989 that it would offer \$150 million in compensation for about 1,250 Canadians infected with HIV through transfusions or blood products.

Nine years later, provincial health ministers announced a \$1.2-billion federal-provincial compensation but the package limited claims for victims infected between 1986 and 1990.

Tim McClemon of the Hepatitis C Society there is still plenty of money from the original \$1.2 billion that hasn't been distributed yet, partly because many of those infected with hep C have yet to develop symptoms.

McClemont said the criminal charges make it clear to Ottawa that it must compensate all victims, not just some.

"It means now we can continue to move forward with our arguments that we've been making all along, that the federal government should be excepting everybody who got hepatitis C, no matter what time frame they got it," McClemont said.

The Canadian Hemophilia Society also renewed their call that all individuals infected by tainted blood -- at any time -- be compensated.

Tory leader Joe Clark demanded to know from Health Minister Anne McLellan whether the government planned to reconsider its decision.

"The short answer is no," McClellan said. "We are not going to reconsider our position."

She said the federal government will instead await the outcome of the charges before addressing the issue of expanded compensation.

Victims who attended the RCMP news conference Wednesday clapped as the charges were announced. Most victims said they felt elated, but it did not offer closure for the personal tragedy they have endured.

"I think I really was filled with a sense of relief that the charges had been laid," said Janet Conners, whose husband Randy died from AIDS from HIV-tainted blood. She and her son also contracted the disease.

"So I don't feel that sense of closure, and I guess in part because I look at these charges as being more about safety and accountability than necessarily the emotional end of something for me."

James Kreppner, who was infected with hepatitis C through tainted blood, said the charges were bitter-sweet.

"I think I was happy, and I think the other victims were happy that finally justice was being done," Kreppner said, noting that victims are still fighting for compensation.

Former hepatitis C Society spokesperson Jo-Anne Manser hailed the charges but said "we also have to think that it is the first day in a long legal battle."

"Even to this day, there is very little acknowledgment of type of the suffering and

death that is caused by hepatitis C. It has literally ripped families and people apart," he said.

Janet Conners thinks her deceased husband would have appreciated the charges all the same.

"I think he probably would have smiled that little smile he had, and I think he would have got his fishing rod and canoe and gone fishing," she said."