

\$100m AIDS payment 'not admission of fault'

By MARY ANN BENITEZ

A \$100 million ex-gratia payment scheme to Hongkong's 61 HIV-infected haemophiliacs and families is not an admission of government fault, the Secretary for Health and Welfare Elizabeth Wong says.

The 61, including 26 schoolboys and five who had already died of AIDS, were believed to have been infected when they were injected with contaminated blood before blood screening tests were introduced in 1985.

Wong unveiled details of a \$350 million one-off AIDS grant, proposed in the 1993-94 Budget.

This included a \$100 million compassionate grant, \$200 million for medical support services for all HIV and AIDS patients and \$50 million for prevention programs.

Wong said Governor Chris Patten would appoint a council soon to administer the fund and set guidelines on payment methods "comparable to the United Kingdom" model.

Each of the 61 could receive up to \$1.6 million in a lump sum.

Principal assistant secretary for Health and Welfare Victor Ng said child patients in the UK were paid £41,500 (HK\$465,837). Married adults with children were paid £80,500.

Wong said the grant did not reflect a change of heart, despite the fact that she told legislators in December that no compensation was intended.

Patten later stepped in to announce a compassionate fund would be given priority.

Wong said ex-gratia payments were not compensation, which implied legal liability and

that the government was somehow at fault. "It does not mean we have changed our minds. I have not used the word compensation, have I?"

She said infected haemophiliacs still had the right to file a lawsuit but would not be able to retain double payments if they won.

A Haemophiliac Association spokesman said no lawsuits were planned as long as payments were satisfactory.

He described the sum of \$100 million as heartening, and hoped an association member would be invited to sit on the AIDS fund council.

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