



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON

JAN 18 2001

The Honorable Lane Evans
Ranking Democratic Member
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U. S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Evans:

Thank you for your comments regarding the Department of Veterans Affairs' plans to issue a regulation creating a presumption of service connection for certain veterans with hepatitis C infection.

We appreciate your support for provisions that would include veterans who had blood transfusions or solid organ transplants before January 1, 1993, in service or who underwent hemodialysis in service. You also indicated that Committee members would support a presumption of hepatitis C infection for those who had direct contact with blood during combat or during treatment of wounds in a field medical facility before December 31, 1992.

In our judgment, direct contact with blood during combat or during treatment of wounds in a field medical facility constitutes a lower risk factor than the multiple exposures to blood under unsterile conditions that are likely for medics or corpsmen who served in combat, and that would put them in a relatively high risk group for acquiring hepatitis C infection. We, therefore, believe it would be appropriate to limit presumptive service connection to medics or corpsmen who served in combat. In addition, they constitute a relatively clearly identifiable group, a factor that would support fairness and consistency in adjudication of claims. We do not, however, believe we should limit the date of exposure for medics or corpsmen who served in combat because the screening procedures that lowered the risk of hepatitis C infection from medical use of blood did not eliminate the risk of other types of exposure to infected blood. Other individuals who believe that they were exposed to infected blood during combat could still submit a claim for hepatitis C infection, to be established through the routine adjudication process.

Thank you again for your support on this issue. We have sent a similar letter to Chairman Christopher H. Smith and Congressman Bob Stump.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Hershel W. Gober".

Hershel W. Gober
Acting