"RCMP charge six in tainted-blood scandal"

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By Rob Gilroy, CTV News Staff

Four doctors, the Canadian Red Cross and a U.S. drug company were charged with 32 criminal offences by the RCMP Wednesday in relation to the tainted-blood scandal of the 1980s that left tens of thousands of Canadians infected with HIV and hepatitis.

The Mounties, after a five-year investigation, laid charges that include criminal negligence causing bodily harm. There are also charges of common nuisance by endangering the public and one charge of failure to notify under the Food and Drugs Act Regulations.

Supt. Rod Knecht of the RCMP Blood Task Force said the charges relate "to decision-making within the structures and systems of the blood distribution system in Canada between the years 1980 and 1990."

"The responsibility of the RCMP as Canada's national police service is to ensure safe homes and safe communities," said Knecht. "The RCMP Blood Task Force was to gather the facts on behalf of the Canadian public, and to lay criminal charges if the evidence supported reasonable grounds that a criminal offence had occurred."

"The charges we have announced today reflect the fact that our investigation has met the requirements to lay these particular charges," Knecht added.

"It is important to note that there are specific aspects of this investigation that we..."
continue to pursue. The possibility exists that we will be laying further charges."

Charged are:

- **Canadian Red Cross Society.** Accused of six counts of common nuisance by endangering the public.
- **Armour Pharmaceutical Co.,** based in Bridgewater, New Jersey. Armour is charged with three counts of criminal negligence causing bodily harm; one count of common nuisance by endangering the public; and one count of failure to notify under the Food and Drugs Act Regulations.
- **Dr. John Furesz,** of Ottawa. Furesz, the former director of the bureau of biologics at the federal government's Health Protection Branch, is charged with three counts of criminal negligence causing bodily harm and one count of common nuisance by endangering the public.
- **Dr. Wark Boucher** of Nepean, Ontario. Boucher was director of the blood products division of the federal government's Health Protection Branch. He's charged with three counts of criminal negligence causing bodily harm and one count of common nuisance by endangering the public.
- **Dr. Roger Perrault** of Ottawa. Perrault was the former director of the Canadian Red Cross Society's Blood Transfusion Service. He's charged with three counts of criminal negligence causing bodily harm and seven counts of common nuisance by endangering the public.
- **Dr. Michael Rodell,** of Pennsylvania. Rodell worked for the Armour Pharmaceutical Co. and is charged with three counts of criminal negligence causing bodily harm and one count of common nuisance by endangering the public.

**Canadian Red Cross "sorry"**

"As a humanitarian organization my first thoughts are to victims and families of victims," Pierre Duplessis, Secretary General of the Canadian Red Cross, told reporters later Wednesday. "This is a tragedy and we fully understand that."

"We're terribly sorry. We know what it is to suffer. I know it personally, I'm a physician. We apologized in the past and I would like to reiterate that we apologize," Duplessis said.

Duplessis said he was surprised by the charges, especially since the Red Cross restructured after 1998, including transferring its blood program to another agency, paying compensation to victims and refocusing its efforts on humanitarian efforts.

"We thought the story was over," said Duplessis. "We were surprised because we made a lot of changes along the way."
"(But) I don't want to comment on whether it's fair or unfair. We have been charged and that is clear. However, what is important to us is to continue our humanitarian work. We are an essential group here in Canada and intend to remain so."

Duplessis said he would not comment on the specifics of the charges until the society meets with its legal counsel and board of directors.

All four doctors and Armour were charged with criminal negligence and endangering the public for allegedly allowing Armour's blood-clotting product, which was infected with HIV, to be given to hemophilia patients.

The charges against Armour also relate to its alleged failure to alert Canadian health officials of suspected problems with the blood product it distributed to the Canadian Red Cross.

The charge of criminal negligence causing bodily harm carries a maximum 10-year sentence.

"The Canadian public needs to have confidence in their public institutions," said Knecht. "The Canadian public has the right to expect the safest blood and the safest blood products possible. This is fundamental to the health, safety and lives of everyone living in Canada."

**A history**

The RCMP Blood Task Force was established just months after the release of an inquiry's final report on the Canadian blood system.

On Nov. 26, 1997, Justice Horace Krever blasted Ottawa, the provinces and the Canadian Red Cross. He named individuals who were central to the tragedy, which left close to 1,200 Canadians infected with HIV and tens of thousands contaminated with hepatitis C.

Krever made 50 recommendations -- about a third of which have been implemented -- but did not assign criminal liability. That was left up to the RCMP task force.

In their investigation, launched on Feb. 12, 1998, police conducted more than 700 interviews and reviewed several million documents. They set up a national toll-free line to encourage people to provide them with more information.

Investigators travelled to other countries, including the United States, Australia, Costa Rica, France, Britain, Switzerland, and Belgium.
"This major criminal investigation was both massive and complex, involving many jurisdictions, hundreds of witnesses and over a million pages of documents," said Insp. Gilles Michaud, officer in charge of the Ottawa-based portion of the task force.

"One of the major challenges was that the alleged offences occurred 15 to 20 years prior to the start of the investigation; so, locating witnesses and documents for the time period under investigation was a lengthy and exacting task," added Michaud. "Investigators took a deliberate, thorough and systematic approach."

Some of the key issues pointed out by Krever included:

- Concerns over the cost of test kits to detect the AIDS virus in donated blood caused a seven-month delay in their use.
- A system to screen high-risk donors wasn't introduced in 1993, even though the threat of contaminated blood was clear.
- Older blood products that hadn't been subjected to high levels of heat, which in 1984 was learned could kill the AIDS virus, continued to be given to hemophiliacs until July of 1985.
- Blood wasn't screened for hepatitis C until 1990 in Canada, four years after U.S. blood banks started using a so-called "surrogate test" to screen out the disease. The Red Cross questioned the $10-million annual cost and its effectiveness.

With a report from The Canadian Press"