

By Tim Bugler

The world's first trial which could end the risk of contracting the human form of mad cow disease from blood transfusions has begun in Scotland.

Patients with heart problems who need blood will be offered donations which have been 'cleansed' in a filter to remove the particles, known as prions, that transmit variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD).

Doctors hope the treatment, being developed by French medical technology firm MacoPharma, will lead to the eradication of any chance of catching the incurable brain disease from transfusions.

At present, patients receiving blood transfusions are at risk of

## 'Safety of blood is paramount'

contracting the disease from a donor. Yesterday, Dr Mervyn Turner, Scientific Director of the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service, which will carry out the Edinburgh-based trial, said healthy volunteers had shown no ill-effects from receiving the filtered blood.

He added that similar trials would now be carried out in other countries.

He said: "There are concerns about the risk of vCJD in blood supplies. If we can show these filters are likely to be effective and are safe, it is an extremely promising development."

If the process is deemed to work, it will be a major advance in the fight against vCJD and would cost an estimated £8million per year.

At estimated 1,200 Scots have vCJD, but are not yet aware they have the illness. In Britain, 163 people are known or suspected to have died from vCJD. Four are

# Scots medicines hail advance in mad cow disease fight

thought to have received the infection through donated blood.

The disease was first identified more than a decade ago but it has taken scientists years to work out how to tackle it because the abnormal prions are so complex.

The major risk factors for contracting the disease were eating infected meat during the 1980s and 1990s and through blood transfusions. But experts now believe that, following changes in farming and slaughterhouse standards, the only remaining risk factor is blood transfusion.

Measures taken to reduce transmission risks include removing white blood cells from donated blood, but this only cuts the risk by about half. Tests on the prion filter using animals have so far shown that it

completely prevents the prions being passed on from a blood donor to a recipient. The filter contains a resin that binds to the prions and so removes them from the blood.

The development was welcomed by patient groups. Gill Turner, national coordinator for the CJD Network, said: "We welcome anything that will make blood safer. Hopefully, each step that is taken will eventually lead to vCJD being eliminated."

A Scottish Executive spokesman said: "We believe the safety of bloods is paramount and welcome any proven advances in reducing risk to patients from blood donations. Further information on the outcomes of ongoing research is required."

For sufferers of the disease, CJD can be as swift as it is deadly. In July



Victim of vCJD, Adrian Barras

2001, Adrian Barras, 26, became Scotland's 15th vCJD victim.

He died three months after he was diagnosed with the illness, that stripped him of his ability to walk and talk, leaving him able to move and eat only through facial expressions.

The first signs of CJD had appeared in January that year, when he was on holiday with his partner Susan, who noticed his speech becoming increasingly distorted. He then began to lose control of his legs.

After consulting his GP, he was transferred to Glasgow's Southern General Hospital for tests.

A month after he learned he had the illness, he married Susan at the register office in his home town of Hamilton, Lanarkshire.

He died eight weeks later.