

Governor-to-be defends use of treatment with links to CJD



Professor David de Kretser says he has been "tarred with a broad brush".

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By Stephen Cauchi

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THE governor-elect of Victoria, David de Kretser, has defended his use of a medical technique that was later banned after it was found to be infecting patients with Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD).

Professor De Kretser, an endocrinologist for 40 years, was one of many doctors who used the technique of treating infertility with hormones from the brains of corpses. The technique was also used to treat short stature.

In the 1980s, it was revealed that this technique was capable of transmitting CJD — the human equivalent of "mad cow disease" — and caused a range of other side-effects.

Four Australians have died from CJD as a result.

All 2100 patients approved for treatment between 1967 and 1985, when the Australian Human Pituitary Program was suspended, live with the uncertainty of not knowing whether they have been infected with CJD.

In 1994, following a government inquiry, the Allars report into the use of derived hormones and CJD in Australia found that much of the treatment was experimental: "Laws were bent, ethics ignored, rules stretched, corners cut, red tape avoided and dead bodies unlawfully raided for pituitary glands."

The report was also sharply critical of the Human Pituitary Advisory Committee, which advised the Federal Government when the technique was being carried out, and of doctors and health officials for not informing patients of known risks.

But Professor de Kretser told *The Age* yesterday the only patients he treated using the technique were four infertile men, whom he treated in the late 1960s.

"It was entirely appropriate to give these men hormone to stimulate their sperm production," he said. "It was worldwide practice at the time."

The men, he said, "were fit and well as far as I'm aware".

Of their chances of contracting CJD, he said it was unlikely given the time that had passed.

Professor De Kretser said at the time he had no idea they could contract CJD.

But the professor said that while he co-wrote papers and was a close colleague of doctors who used the growth hormone, he never had used hormones other than for infertility treatment, nor was he a member of the Human Pituitary Advisory Committee, which was criticised in the Allars report.

"I don't understand what this has got to do with me other than I'm being tarred with a broad brush," he said.

Of the doctors who extensively used the hormones for growth purposes, he said "it's always easy when you're looking back in hindsight."