

Witness Name: Valerie Hipwell

Statement No.: WITN008001

Exhibits: N/A

Dated: 25 January 2019

INFECTED BLOOD INQUIRY

WRITTEN STATEMENT OF VALERIE JEAN HIPWELL

I provide this statement, dated 25th January 2019, in response to a request under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006.

I, Valerie Jean Hipwell, will say as follows: -

Section 1. Introduction

- 1.1 My name is Valerie Jean Hipwell. My date of birth is GRO-C1949. My home address is known to the Inquiry.

- 1.2 I was infected with the Hepatitis C virus ("HCV") after being given infected fresh frozen plasma in 1978. I intend to speak about the nature of my illness, how the illness affected me, the treatment I received and the impact it had on my life and on my family. I should say that actual dates and even the years of 'events' that I will refer to are vague in my mind. I have no documents or notes with which to refresh my memory.

Section 2. How Infected

- 2.1 I was infected with HCV at Southampton General Hospital in 1978 at the age of 29.
- 2.2 I was seven months pregnant with my son Stephen when I developed a blood clot in my leg. Upon being admitted to hospital, I was catheterised, which caused the blood clot to travel into my lung. I went into cardiac arrest and had to be resuscitated, sending me into early labour. I was in labour for 3 days and underwent major surgery to tie off the inferior vena cava and had an emergency caesarean to deliver my baby. As part of this surgery, I was given fresh frozen plasma that was infected with HCV. This transfusion saved my life but I subsequently developed an HCV infection.
- 2.3 I was in hospital for two months following the birth of my son. Upon my release, I started suffering significant pain in my liver and extreme tiredness. I also suffered from a number of further blood clots. I was in and out of hospital over the next ten years as a result of these conditions and had to have a second transfusion of blood products in the 1980s.
- 2.4 I complained of the pain in my liver to my general practitioner many times, who suspected that I was making up my symptoms, or that they were somehow a figment of my imagination. My GP said that he would refer me to a 'pain doctor'. In fact, it turned out that the doctor that I saw was a psychologist, specialising in psychosomatic medicine. The psychologist suggested that I was inventing the pain in sympathy for my mother, GRO-C
GRO-C This was ridiculous and made me extremely angry. My pain very real.
- 2.5 About 3 months after that I was given more blood, after I had been rushed to hospital with a cyst on my ovary.
- 2.6 In the late 1980s, I was recovering in hospital after suffering a blood clot when, by chance, my blood tests were reviewed by a liver specialist. That specialist diagnosed me with HCV after I had a biopsy and I started

attending the liver clinic at Royal South Hants Hospital in Southampton. I have had three biopsies to my liver, and during the 2nd one, they nicked the lining of my abdomen. I spent 2 nights in hospital and I was told that I couldn't move. The night I returned home, where I was living alone, I had an abdominal bleed caused by the biopsy. I had to be rushed to hospital.

- 2.7 Upon my diagnosis, I was given little, if any, explanation of HCV or the effects it would have on my health and life. There was very little understanding of the virus at the time by the public or the medical profession, and I thought that my diagnosis meant that I was going to die. The stigma attached to the virus, coupled with the lack of information provided to me, meant that my diagnosis left me feeling "dirty". I was not a drug addict, alcoholic or any of the things that Hepatitis was associated with.
- 2.8 In total, participated in three drug trials aimed at curing my HCV. The first trial took place in the mid to late 1990s and lasted nine months. I was required to self-inject the trial drugs (including Interferon and another, the name of which I cannot remember but it was not Ribavirin, which I had in a later trial). I managed this ok. This treatment left me feeling as though I constantly had severe flu and it made me very tired. The second trial took place a few years after the first and lasted for about six months. Neither the first nor second trial was successful in ridding me of HCV.
- 2.9 In terms of other medication, I have at various times been prescribed Tramadol and Temazepam to ease my symptoms.
- 2.10 I participated in a third drug trial, probably 2005/2006, which lasted for approximately nine months and this finally cured me of my HCV infection.
- 2.11 After I was clear of HCV, my doctor told me that I had slight scarring on my liver but I was not offered any sort of ongoing medical check-ups to monitor my condition. I continue to suffer from pain in my liver and tiredness, although my symptoms are not as strong now that I have been

cured of HCV. I do not have any regular checks, either to make sure that the HCV has not returned or to check my liver for scarring or cirrhosis.

Section 3. Other Infections

3.1 I did not receive any other infections as a result of my medical treatment.

Section 4. Consent

4.1 The transfusion that infected me with HCV was performed in emergency circumstances in hospital and it saved my life. I was too ill to provide consent. I quite clearly needed the blood but you don't expect it to be contaminated.

Section 5. Impact

5.1 My HCV infection has had significant, ongoing and irreversible impacts on my life.

Relationship with son

5.2 Following the birth of my son, I was frequently in and out of hospital as a result of my HCV infection and issues with blood clots. I also suffered from mobility problems as a result of unrelated issues with my knees, which continue to this day.

5.3 I was a single mother and, while it was not easy to cope with looking after a young child while suffering from these conditions, I was lucky enough to be able to leave my son in the care of my sister or my former mother-in-law when I was forced to go into hospital. This arrangement was suitable to everyone involved because my son was staying with family members and enjoyed visiting them, just as they enjoyed having him to visit.

5.4 Approximately three years after my son was born, my father was placed in a nursing home. The social worker assigned to his case took an interest in my son and I, and arranged for us to move into my father's former apartment which was located on the ground floor and therefore easier for me to manage with my mobility problems.

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5.10 [REDACTED] GRO-C

5.11 My husband Ron, was in my life and therefore Steve's, from the time I was in hospital after Steve was born. Steve regarded Ron as his dad, he had nothing to do with his real father. [REDACTED] GRO-C

[REDACTED] GRO-C

5.12 [REDACTED] GRO-C

5.13 [REDACTED] GRO-C

[REDACTED] GRO-C Our relationship did eventually improve and we are very close now but there were a lot of 'lost' years and though we have now resolved things, it alone has a had significant impact on Stephen and myself. You don't get those years back.

Social stigma

5.14 When I was first diagnosed with HCV, there was a general lack of understanding about the cause, symptoms and spread of the virus in both the public and the medical profession. As a result, I have been made to feel ashamed and dirty because of my HCV diagnosis.

5.15 For example, I used to be placed in an isolation ward when I was in hospital for operations or treatment for fear that I would infect other

patients or the hospital staff. I know this is common now in medical environments, with more rigorous Health & Safety rules but in those days, it wasn't common for medical staff to wear masks and gloves when dealing with everyone. It was for me though. In my presence, they were instructed to wear all the protective gear and in a very public and humiliating way. When having my blood taken, I was often placed in a separate, cordoned off area and made to feel different from other people.

- 5.16 Away from medical premises, [REDACTED] GRO-D [REDACTED] used to bleach the toilet seat in her house after I had used it out of fear that she would catch HCV from also sitting there. She bleached cups that I drank from also. We used to have conversations where I would tell her that she could only catch anything from my blood and it would be obvious if there was blood on anything but it made no difference. It was just ignorance, I know but it made me feel like I was unclean and dirty. It was truly awful. Even now, as a result I find myself being obsessive when cleaning around the house and I believe that this stems from my paranoia of having HCV.
- 5.17 That said, I was paranoid and didn't take chances myself. Due to the lack of information provided to me, I was also not completely convinced about how HCV was transmitted. I refused to let my husband use my bath towel or share my toothbrush for fear of passing on the infection to him. He had no such concerns and never let my condition bother him.
- 5.18 One year, a family member drew my attention to an article published in a local newspaper, The Echo. They were asking for people who had been infected with HCV as a result of blood transfusions to get in contact with the paper. The article said that a solicitor in Portsmouth was seeking claimants to a potential class action litigation against the National Health Service.
- 5.19 I went to the newspaper and when I made enquiries about the solicitor's, I was asked questions by what I now realise was a journalist, who promised me that my story, photograph and personal details would be

forwarded onto the solicitor. There was no mention that I would become part of an article in the paper. Not long after this I went on holiday, overseas. When I returned, I found that my story had in fact featured in the newspaper and then as a result shown on local television on the evening news show, hosted by Fred Dineage. My name and address were published and I began to receive hate mail from strangers calling me "dirty" and insinuating that I contracted HCV from taking drugs and that I probably had AIDS. My son, who was in his final year of high school at the time, GRO-C The entire experience was extremely distressing to us all.

Professional life

5.20 Prior to 1978, I had always maintained employment, most recently as a secretary for a shipping company. However, after being infected with HCV and developing issues with blood clots, I was never able to return to work in any meaningful capacity. I attempted to return to my job as a secretary in a shipping company, on a handful of occasions and each time found my symptoms (extreme lethargy, pain and blood clots) to be overwhelming. Ultimately, the company found a replacement for me as I was unable to work consistently. I haven't worked since. I should say that my intention had been to always work, it had already been arranged with my former mother-in-law, Steve's grandmother, that I would return to work and that she would look after him.

5.21 As a result, I have been forced to rely on social benefits and payments from Alliance House Organisations in order to live. Some weeks, I was required to live on as a little as £7.

Section 6. Financial Assistance

6.1 About, I would say 15 years ago but I cannot be sure, my daughter-in-law found out about the Skipton Fund from a television advertisement and suggested that I get in contact with them. I was told to get my doctor to

complete a form setting out how, where and why I was infected with HCV and return it to the Fund. I subsequently received a £20,000 pay out immediately upon registering. I never met with anyone from the Fund.

- 6.2 For the last three or four years, I have been receiving £4,000 per year in payments of £1,000 a quarter, from the English Infected Blood Support Scheme. I have also received a cold weather payment since I have been getting the quarterly payments. This was £600 last Christmas, previously it had been £400.

Section 7. Other Issues

- 7.1 I mentioned earlier about an appeal in The Echo asking for recipients of infected blood to contact a solicitor. I did follow this up and met with a solicitor at Churchers Solicitors in Portsmouth on a number of occasions from around 1996 to discuss a class action against the NHS on behalf of Haemophiliacs and people who had been infected with HCV as a result of blood transfusions. The solicitor obtained my medical records from various hospitals and medical centres and found that the batch numbers of the fresh frozen plasma that I received in 1978, had been removed from the hospital notes. The solicitor somehow managed to track down the batch numbers from other records, although I do not have copies of these records now. As far as I am aware, the litigation progressed to the High Court before being thrown out. I never took any further legal action.
- 7.2 In addition to the problems related to the infected blood I had been given, unrelated I have also suffered with problems with my knees and have had them replaced. My condition caused by the infected blood given to me has made dealing with this aspect of my health much worse both in terms of the medical procedures, recovery and my mobility.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed:

GRO-C

Dated: 25th January 2019