

Witness Name: Fiona Ellen Birkett

Statement No: WITN3314001

Exhibits: WITN3314002

Dated: May 2019

INFECTED BLOOD INQUIRY

FIRST WRITTEN STATEMENT OF FIONA ELLEN BIRKETT

I, Fiona Ellen Birkett will say as follows:-

Section 1. Introduction

1. My name is Fiona Ellen Birkett and I live at GRO-C Leeds, GRO-C My date of birth is GRO-C 1987. I have an older brother and sister, called William and Rhiannon. I am married and am employed as a Chief Executive of an education charity called SHINE: Support and Help IN Education.
2. I provide this statement in response to a request under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006 in respect of my late father, Dr William Spellman, born on the GRO-C GRO-C 1943, who passed away on the 28 July 2009, aged 65, as a result of Hepatitis C. I am aware that my mother Irene Ruth Spellman has also provided a statement and will be giving oral evidence. My brother William Spellman and sister Rhiannon Miller will also be giving witness evidence.
3. This witness statement has been prepared without the benefit of access to my father's full medical records.

Section 2. How Affected

4. My father, William Spellman, was infected with contaminated blood as the result of a blood transfusion he received whilst being treated for leukaemia. For 15 years, he suffered from the effects of Hepatitis C whilst sheltering me from the knowledge of his condition.
5. When I was 17, Dad started dialysis 3 days per week, so he had to tell me what was wrong. After Dad began dialysis he lived for another 5 years, during which time his health and quality of life steadily deteriorated. He lived throughout this time with remarkable fortitude and courage, and he never gave up hope that one day he might be cured. Dad finally lost his battle on 28 July 2009.
6. I know very little about the details of his leukaemia treatment when he was given the infected blood transfusion, but I hope that evidence already provided by other family members will have covered this.
7. I was only 2 years old when my dad was infected with Hepatitis C (in around 1989 or 1990) and I didn't find out until 15 years later so I don't know the particulars.

Section 3. Other Infections

8. I do not believe that my dad contracted any other infection apart from Hepatitis C.

Section 4. Consent

9. I do not know if my dad was tests or treated without his knowledge.

Section 5. Impact of the Infection

10. My dad took great pains to minimise the visibility of his illness. He refused to be defined by his condition, and he cared very deeply about minimising any impact on the wider family. Physically, in his latter years, Dad became thinner and weaker and he suffered with visible exhaustion. He also experienced significant pain in his joints which made activities like driving, cooking and eventually walking difficult.
11. My dad was a fiercely proud man, and he struggled mentally with needing to rely on others to go about his daily life. His illness impacted on his life in a myriad of ways. Once when we were watching the news together there was a story about someone who had been told they had a life limiting illness, and he told me that knowing what you are going to die of, and that there is nothing you can do to prevent it, blights your life. I didn't appreciate the full meaning of what he was saying until much later.
12. I think Hepatitis C changed his relationships fundamentally. In his younger years Dad was a playful, jovial person, but as life went on he became more withdrawn into himself, less relaxed in company and of course less energetic overall. Dad was a wonderfully committed husband and father and he remained so to the very end. But he was certainly less energetically involved than he would have liked to be.
13. The pain of bereavement is made immeasurably stronger when you feel that something need not have happened. My dad's illness has made me older than my years, more fearful, more serious and less carefree than many of my peers. I sometimes have irrational fears that other people close to me are going to die.
14. The principle impact on me has been the 10 years I have now lived without my dad. He wasn't there on my wedding day and he won't be there for other key moments in my life. Sometimes I have dreams about him but I can never see his face. I worry that I don't have enough photos of him, that I'm starting to forget. More than this though, he isn't there on a day to day basis, at the end of the phone when I need him. There is never a good time or way to lose

someone you love so deeply. But the fact that it was all so preventable is a hard reality to live with.

15. I'm not sure if this is in anyway useful but I did write a poem about Dad just after he died and I thought I'd share it as I reflect on the broader impact of his illness. It's called 'Dear Dad', which I exhibit at WITN3314002.
16. Whenever discussing my dad's condition, I would always carefully recount the circumstances in which he was infected to stave off potential judgement. I know he used to feel very offended when medical professionals would make assumptions about him being a drug user in particular.
17. My mum carried a huge weight on her shoulders for all those years, mentally, emotionally and financially. I know she experienced feelings of guilt as the survivor and I know she misses him very deeply. In the first few years after his death, mum experienced huge loneliness and dislocation and this was a cause of constant concern for me and my two siblings. My brother is like his father in that he doesn't express how he is feeling, but I think it's made him assume additional responsibilities for looking after the rest of us. My sister misses his reassuring presence and I think is still yearning for his calming influence.
18. Dad had to work part time hours in order to access dialysis and he didn't bring the same energy to his teaching role in his final years as he might have hoped. He found work incredibly tiring and ultimately he had to give up, but he was a very intelligent man and I think he found this very tough.
19. Partly in response to my dad's illness, I studied ferociously at university and got a first class honours degree. I didn't realise it at the time but I think I was doing the last thing that I could to make him proud. He was already very ill when I left home and I think I knew then that time was short.

Section 6. Treatment/care/support

20. I am not aware he suffered difficulty accessing treatment for Hepatitis C.

21. Counselling or psychological support has never been made available to me. I am not aware whether any support that was offered to Dad either.

Section 7. Financial Assistance

22. I do not know any of the details regarding financial assistance but I hope that my mum's evidence will help to answer this point.

Section 8. Other Issues

23. As regards my hope for the Inquiry, I recently read a book entitled 'Black Box Thinking' which altered my perceptions about how we as a society deal with failure, especially in instances such as these when the stakes, and emotions, run so high. I am not looking for any particular individual or organisation to blame, and I think there is a very real danger that in the search to find a culprit we only obfuscate further the search for truth. We all react defensively to protect ourselves when we feel under attack, never more so than when our expertise and judgements are on the line.

24. If the Inquiry finds evidence of a wilful cover up of evidence thus far, and/or attempts by the authorities to prevent the true nature of the tragedy coming to light - then I think the important question to ask is why, and how we build a culture where we can own, share and ultimately learn from such mistakes in the future. There is much to learn from the aviation industry here, where mistakes are widely shared and lessons spread throughout the system, in ways which de-risk the exercise for individual actors and ultimately further passenger safety.

25. I think it is reasonable to assume that contaminated blood was not the deliberate design of anyone who wanted thousands of people to die unnecessarily. Whoever took those decisions presumably did so because they thought it was the right call at the time, so the more useful question for me is what safeguards should have been in place to prevent this from happening. We owe it to every person affected to take every action we can to reduce the chances of anything like happening again - in my mind that is the only justice there is.

Anonymity

26. I do not wish to remain anonymous and I understand this statement will be published and disclosed as part of the Inquiry.

27. I do not want to give oral evidence to the Inquiry.

Statement of Truth

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

Signed..

GRO-C

..... aka Fiona Birkett

Dated.....

29/05/2019.....