

Cruel irony in haemophiliac's death

Celia Hall reports on the case of a man who fell victim to hepatitis C after 'luckily' avoiding the Aids virus

The premature death 19 weeks ago of William Murphy, a haemophiliac, was a tragic irony.

Mr Murphy, 58, an accountant from Liverpool, died of liver failure brought on by the hepatitis C virus. He was infected by drops of the blood clotting agent Factor VIII.

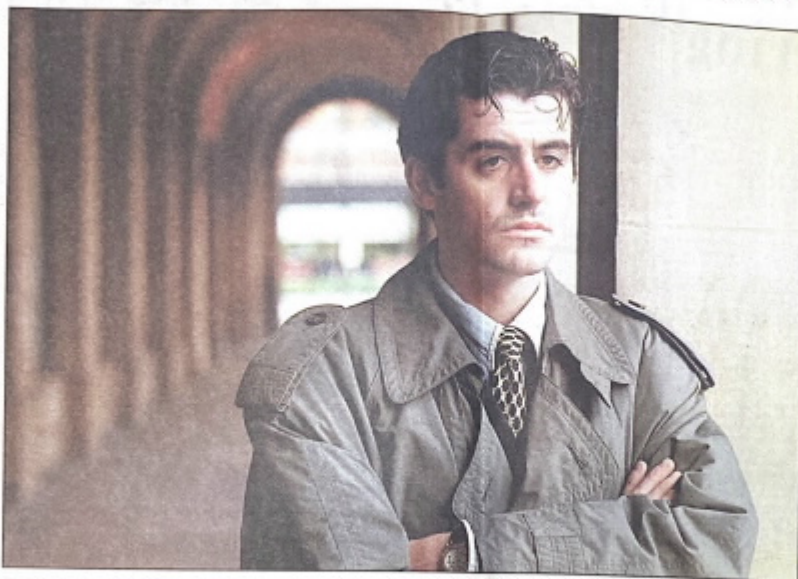
His two brothers, also haemophiliacs, died in 1989 and 1990 from HIV infection caught from infected Factor VIII. Mr Murphy was assured after repeated tests that he was free of the Aids virus. His doctors told him he was lucky.

His son Greg, 27, said yesterday: "At the time my father always said it would not be the end of it, that he could not believe he was all right. We just said it was Dad being pessimistic."

Now Greg Murphy, his mother Maureen, and his sister, who has a three-year-old son with haemophilia, are determined to seek compensation. "My father discussed this with us in the weeks before he died. He said that we should, but that we must not become obsessed by it."

On Wednesday, the Independent revealed that 2,000 haemophiliacs had been infected with hepatitis C from contaminated Factor VIII before 1985 when the blood product was heat-treated. Another 1,000 non-haemophiliacs, who received transfusions of fresh blood before 1991, are also believed to be infected.

Hepatitis C can remain undetected, without producing symptoms for 30 years. However, doctors believe that in haemophiliacs the course of the liver disease may be faster. It appears to have been so in Mr Murphy's case.



Greg Murphy, whose father William, a haemophiliac, died from liver failure after contracting hepatitis C from infected blood products. Photograph: Howard Ratlow

Mr Murphy's family believes the blame lies squarely at the door of the Department of Health. They do not accept the department's line that the blood products were used unwittingly.

"We don't accept that on two counts. First, most of that blood came from the USA which, during the 1960s and 1970s and the early 1980s operated a 'back-a-time' donation temper which attracted junkies, street alcoholics and other desperate people," Mr Murphy said.

"It should have been obvious to anyone with an ounce of common sense that the blood would have been riddled with all kinds of things."

"But the Government saw fit to distribute it to haemophiliacs who were only too grateful for anything to control their condition."

"Second, the Government has already set a precedent for settling cases of haemophiliacs who acquired HIV."

He said his family had decided to draw attention to their case — after years of silence because of the social stigma attached to HIV.

"We have taken so many blows that this latest rebuff from the Government is too much," he said.

William Murphy who needed regular supplies of Factor VIII was, his family believes, infected with hepatitis C in 1981 when he needed emergency surgery for a stomach ulcer. People with haemophilia who need surgery are usually given large amounts of clotting factor before their operation.

That was in November. In December, he had hepatitis. In January, he was told that he had developed a tumour on the liver so he came off the transplant list.

"We were told that an infected liver is a terrible ground for cancer."

Then between 1980 and 1992, when he had the diagnosis, it progressed. He had chronic cirrhosis of the liver.

At one stage he was on the list for a liver transplant and all the tests went well. Then in August, more tests showed that he had developed a tumour on the liver so he came off the transplant list.

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TV inquiry on cot deaths 'risks lives'

BY CELIA HALL
Medical Editor

Dr Kenneth Calman, the Government's chief medical officer, yesterday joined the mounting criticism of the controversial cot-death television report which implied that a fire retardant chemical in babies' mattresses was to blame.

He said that the research in *The Cook Report*, broadcast on Thursday, was "limited, inadequate and flawed" and that advice it gave could put more babies at risk. In particular he criticised the suggestion that parents ensure the safety of a mattress should wrap it in polythene, sealed down with sticky tape. "Wrapping the mattress in polythene is of concern because of the possibility of babies becoming entangled or overheating," he said.

Dr Calman told a press briefing yesterday that an expert working group had reviewed the programme and had concluded it produced nothing to substantiate the government report on cot deaths in 1991 which cleared chemicals in mattresses of blame.

He said the programme had been wrong to imply the only source of antimony, a fire retardant chemical, was from cot mattresses. Trace levels were widely distributed in food, water and tobacco smoke.

Asked if this meant that the programme was putting at risk more babies' lives, he said: "Yes." He added: "On the basis of what we have seen there is no reason to change our established advice... by your baby on its back; don't expose your baby to cigarette smoke; avoid overheating; and follow good hygiene — keep clothing and bedding clean and fresh."

"The Cook Report... has not provided any answers and has left large numbers of people confused and worried."

He nevertheless believed the programme had raised "some questions which need proper investigation" and he is to set up a working party to steer research. A helpline set up by Central TV following the programme received 50,000 calls. Although cot deaths were tragic, the numbers should be seen in context, Dr Calman said. Out of 600,000 births each year, there were 312 deaths in 1991 and 456 in 1992.

The programme was strongly criticised by other experts yesterday for being irresponsible and for making mothers "worry".

The Foundation for the Study of Infant Deaths took 170 calls overnight on Thursday. "We have women on the phone in tears. We have women who are too terrified even to put their babies down to sleep. This programme has caused a most terrible panic," Joyce Lewis, secretary general of the foundation, said yesterday.

"The research in the programme was not substantiated. We have been confused by rumors. It is like calling 'fire' when you don't know if there is one."

The Cook Report presented research that had found antimony in the blood or livers of some cot-death babies. Normal levels of antimony in babies' bodies are not known.

Chris Hiles, an expert on cot deaths from Ashkenazi's Hospital, Cambridge, said the programme was irresponsible. "Mr Cook wants the best of both worlds. He presents this information without giving any sensible data and then he can swim off wondering what his next programme is going to be about," she said.

"We know of babies who have died... in car seats, on sofas, in their parents' beds and in their parents' arms."

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Employers favour Cambridge

BY JUDITH JUDG
Education Editor

Birmingham and Oxford with 63 followed by Imperial College, London, with 60.

Project, which carried out the survey, said: "It shows that the institutions you attend matters."

"There is a feeling that there are better and poorer universities but it is not a clear divide."

Freebies cut at Ministry of Fun