

Witness Name: Mary Ryan
Statement No.: WITN5587001
Exhibits: **WITN5587002**
Dated:

INFECTED BLOOD INQUIRY

WRITTEN STATEMENT OF MARY RYAN

I provide this statement in response to a request under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006 dated 22 January 2021.

I, Mary Ryan, will say as follows: -

Section 1. Introduction

1. My name is Mary Ryan. My date of birth is GRO-C 1955, and my address is known to the Inquiry. I am retired and divorced with five children.
2. I can confirm that I am not legally represented and that I am aware of the anonymity provisions and I am happy for my statement to be in the public domain.
3. My dad's name was David Geekie Thornton. He was born on GRO-C 1919, and he passed away on 18 March 1982. I exhibit his death certificate here **[WITN5587002]**, which confirms that the cause of death was cirrhosis of the liver and hepatic failure

4. I intend to speak about my dad's Hepatitis infection. In particular, the nature of his illness, how the illness affected him, and the impact of the illness on my family's lives.

Section 2. How Affected

5. The events of what happened to my dad occurred a long time ago. Although I was in my 20s, my siblings and I were still relatively young at the time, and our parents tried to shield us away from how bad things were. I am providing this statement with assistance from my daughter and have consulted some of my siblings for help regarding events. This recollection is to the best of our memory and knowledge.
6. Before getting ill, my dad was always a healthy man. He was very fit. He had been in the navy, and he used to cycle to work, he did not even own a car. He did not drink excessively, and in any case, back then pubs used to close at 9pm. Therefore, he was very baffled when he found out that he had a blood infection. At the time, he would have been informed by either the doctors at Coventry and Warwickshire Hospital or his GP, Dr Dooley, at Engleton House.
7. Our family moved from [GRO-C] to [GRO-C] in 1971 so that my dad could work at [GRO-C]. I am not personally aware of my dad ever having a blood transfusion but I do know that he had a knee operation at Bridge of Earn Hospital in Perth, and this was around 1969, not long before we moved. It was the only major operation he had until he became ill. My dad was also a regular blood donor and gave blood frequently over the years in both [GRO-C] and [GRO-C] after we moved back south. I think he gave blood at mobile units and at Dundee Hospital.
8. My dad hated tattoos and smoking, so he did not have any tattoos despite serving in the navy. I would have been too young to remember if he ever received a blood transfusion while in the navy, but two of my

sisters confirmed that he did not receive any treatment abroad during this time. He was certainly not an IV drug user and was happily married to my mum.

9. There was nothing in his life that could account for the infection other than a possible transfusion during his knee operation or, as we believe to be more likely, contracting the infection through shared needle use when donating blood. My father was a regular donor particularly at the mobile unit that attended his place of work all through the 1950s and 1960s and I am aware that there was a tendency to re-use the same needles in extracting blood with them simply being sterilised between patients.
10. I don't know when my dad found out about his infection, but I can remember when he started to get sick. I was about 26 years old and was living with my parents at the time with my two children so it would have been the early 1980s. He said that he felt like there was something stuck in his chest. He went to see the GP and told the doctor of the pain and that he was having dreams of 'ripping out his throat'. The doctor insisted that it was indigestion and heartburn, and sent him back home but the illness persisted.
11. After about a year, he reached a point where he could no longer take the pain and discomfort anymore so he returned to the doctors. This time he saw Dr Dooley and she was shocked that he had been fobbed off. This was when his liver problems came to light, and I guess that this was the period when he was tested and diagnosed.
12. My dad was not the type of person to whine about being sick or being in pain, and he would not have told you he was ill. For him to go to the doctors showed us how bad he really must have been feeling.

13. My dad later told us that he had cirrhosis of the liver caused by a blood infection, and he was being treated by a specialist, Dr Schmidt, at Coventry and Warwickshire Hospital.
14. Dr Schimdt was a fabulous man who did not have the time of the day for people who had been referred to him on the basis of alcohol problems, or who did not want to make the effort to get better. He loved my dad, and I think that this was because he knew that my dad's liver problems were not caused by alcohol abuse – and that he was a fighter.
15. Although my dad was receiving treatment, I could tell that his condition was getting worse. On one occasion, he was very poorly in bed, so my brother and I went to see Dr Dooley, who informed us that she would come down to our house to see him. When Dr Dooley arrived, she was shocked at how ill my father was and she tried to get him admitted to the main hospital, which was Walsgrave Hospital, but she could not, so he was taken to Gulson Road Hospital instead.
16. The treatment my dad received at Gulson Road hospital was shocking and horrible. They did not provide us with any information about what was wrong, and at one point, they were sticking him with so many needles we had to hold him under his arms to steady him physically. It did not look like they knew what they were doing. It was incredibly distressing to witness his condition and my dad seemed to be rapidly deteriorating. My sister and I then removed him from the hospital.
17. We decided to contact Dr Schmidt to inform him of the severity of my dad's condition. Dr Schmidt agreed to come down to visit, and when he arrived, we could see that he was shocked to see how sickly and thin my dad looked. I remember clearly that he said, "I wish you had contacted me when you could not get him to Walsgrave".
18. Dr Schmidt arranged for my dad to be transferred to Walsgrave Hospital, and not long after his admission there, he started to pick up. I

remember my siblings and I constantly going up to see him at the hospital where he was for a number of weeks.

19. One day when we went in, they – I can't recall exactly who, told us that he only had days to live, a few weeks at best. I was completely stunned. I couldn't take it in. Neither could the rest of the family. It was all the more shocking as we thought he was getting better. None of us had ever even seen him sick before this episode - he never even used to have the flu! Now, suddenly, he was going to die?

20. He was in Walsgrave prior to his passing but that before he was an outpatient St Mark's Annexe, the liver Unit at Coventry and Warwickshire Hospitals.

21. When in Walsgrave in the last few weeks, we got more information from Dr Schmidt, but to be honest it went over my head. I had just been told that my dad was going to die and that was all I could think about. I was consumed with worry and fear for him and had to sort out the rest of the family as my sisters were coming down from Scotland.

22. My dad passed away on 18 March 1982. None of us could understand how or why. One of the doctors or nurses then informed us that they wanted to do a post mortem, which added to our confusion. We questioned why they needed to do this. Dr Schmidt then approached us to tell us that he was the one that wanted the post mortem. He insisted that he wanted a correct diagnosis. He did not want it being put down to alcohol when he knew it was the blood infection that was responsible. We agreed to it even though to be honest, none of it made sense at the time.

23. The cause of death was shown as micro nodular cirrhosis and hepatic failure. As far as I am aware there were no problems with his body being released or with the funeral arrangements.

Section 3. Other Infections

24. I don't know if my dad was tested for anything else. I know that it was a blood infection, and I know it was Hepatitis, but I don't think it was Hepatitis B. I don't think he contracted any other infections nor was there any other illnesses that I am aware of that he may have suffered from where this infection may have had an impact. I do not recall any mention of HIV being tested for.

Section 4. Consent

25. It is difficult for me to know whether my dad consented to anything. I know he would have gone along with whatever his doctors said. Back then, you didn't question doctors because their word was gospel. I certainly don't recall him mentioning that he was being tested for hepatitis of any kind, nor do my siblings. Nor do I recall my mum ever mentioning such an occurrence.

Section 5. Impact

26. I know that my dad was surprised when he first discovered he had this infection because he did not know where it came from. I had no clue how serious it was at the time. I think they may have given him an idea but he was not the type of man to talk about a problem, other than with mum and he would not have wanted to worry us.

27. My dad worked all his life until he could not any longer. He was only hospitalised towards the end of his life. He worked for NCR for years, and after we moved to GRO-C, he worked for a car factory. I think he had to either leave his job there because he was too ill to work or he was made redundant.

28. I feel like, as a family we were not given any real information about my dad's condition, such as where it could have come from, any warning

about risks that could have affected us. I think my dad may have told the doctors he was a blood donor. I just know that he wanted answers to how he contracted the infection. I don't recall, and neither do the others, any talk about precautions in the household or when we all got together and I can assure you that if my dad was aware of any danger he would definitely have informed us all.

29. We were a very close family, so we were all heartbroken after my dad died. We were so distraught in our grief that we did not realise that at first, my mum was so devastated by events that she was not grieving. From the outside looking in at the time, it seemed like she was not affected by the loss. There was no crying, no outward signs of mourning so we thought she did not care, but she was simply in shock as we came to realise.

30. Four weeks later, my mum started speaking gibberish. Nothing she said made sense and it seemed like she had lost her way and was out of it. We rushed her to the hospital, and she carried on talking in the same manner, even though she had no idea she was in the hospital. This lasted a few days, and then she seemed to recover and was fine. However not long after we went to visit her and she said that my dad had been in the hospital the night before painting the wall. Her behaviour was bizarre and it was obviously some sort of delayed shock at what happened with my dad.

31. She relapsed in the hospital and within a week, she was dead. The doctors said that she had contracted bronchial pneumonia brought on by the shock of my dad's passing.

32. It was horrendous, and the pain of losing both parents within five weeks of each other was unimaginable. We had just buried my dad, and now we had to arrange another funeral for my mum. Our friends and neighbours all rallied around to help as much as they could, but we as a family were pretty much on autopilot – I know I was.

33. My kids and I had been living with my parents, who had been looking after them, so the loss of both their grandparents impacted them too. My son was 7 or 8 at the time, and we would find him hiding in cupboards – I think he was worried that he may die. My daughter, who was only 5, walked out of school one day, and nobody noticed. I found out from their teacher that the children said that it was because grandad had gone, then their nan had gone, so they were worried that their mum would go too. I had to go and sit in my daughter's class for a little while to reassure her I wasn't going anywhere.
34. My parents' early passing meant that they didn't get to see their grandkids get older and new grandkids be born. I had three more children after they passed. My dad especially adored the children, and the children lost this connection to their grandparents. It was a huge loss for our family. My dad could have still been around today. I feel that I was robbed of both my mum and dad, for myself and my children, as well as my siblings and all because of an infection that he did nothing to deserve. He could have done nothing about preventing it and that makes it very unfair.
35. I had to go on the sick for a little bit after that because I found it difficult to cope. My mood was low and although I had a family to look after it was difficult going on. I was prescribed an antidepressant by my doctor at Engleton House.
36. We were all affected in a major way by the loss of my dad and all suffered as a result. My parents had six children. Two were living up in Scotland at the time, and we had all been very close. GRO-C was the place to be during the holiday periods and we would all regularly get together. My parents were the binding glue for the rest of the family.
37. I am sure my parents must have suffered financial hardship because my dad had never had a day off before and had to give up work.

Unfortunately, I am not in a position to give any detail. My dad's funeral was covered by an insurance policy, and my parents did not have a mortgage.

38. I think that because of the liver disease, my dad may have experienced some stigma because people back then would have thought he was an alcoholic. Liver disease was very much associated with taking too much alcohol. However, I cannot provide any specific instances that come to mind and again he would probably not have spoken of it to me.

Section 6. Treatment/Care/Support

39. I don't know if my dad faced any obstacles obtaining treatment since I am not sure what treatment was available for the condition specifically. I do know that the way he was treated at Gulson Road Hospital was horrendous.
40. I am not aware whether my parents were offered any psychological help or support. I don't remember that being the case. My parents would have played it down if they were because they would not have wanted me to worry since I had two kids to look after at the time I lived with them.

Section 7. Financial Assistance

41. My sister Marion, who has since passed away, found out about the Skipton Fund from the newspaper. I called them on the phone to find out further information, and I applied with supporting notes from my sisters Eileen and Betty in March 2011.
42. The application form itself was fine to fill out, but the details requested were impossible to obtain.
43. Between June and September 2011, I made applications to the coroner's office for my dad's death certificate. I went to see the GP to

find more information about my dad's illness and obtain his medical records. After explaining the situation, the doctor I spoke to said that he could not give me the information and directed me to check with Walsgrave Hospital. At the hospital, they told me that they had destroyed the records ten years after my father's death as this was the policy

44. On 29 February 2012, the Skipton Fund rejected the application based on incomplete records. My entire family was disappointed because we believed we had explained this. How can we give them things that do not exist any longer? I put a lot of work into getting all of the information they had asked for, providing everything I could until I couldn't anymore.
45. I didn't appeal the decision because I told my family I couldn't do it anymore. I found it very emotional and there is a feeling that you are just not believed. They agreed because it felt a bit pointless. What the Fund were asking for was ridiculous, and we did not want to bother bashing our heads against a brick wall. More than anything, I wanted answers, and I still want answers.
46. You can't put a price on your mum and dad's life, maybe some people can, but I know I can't. We just wanted to know what happened to our dad. My dad wanted these answers too, especially about the hepatitis and I thought maybe I could at least get to the truth and do it for him since he went to his death never really knowing what killed him.

Section 8. Other Issues

47. I have tried to contact Dr Dooley, to see if she could have helped with the records, but she has since retired and Dr Schmidt has passed away.
48. I don't think what happened to my dad affected my faith in the system, certainly not at the time as I did not think that this could have happened in this country. It was only when we found out that so many others were

affected through that article in the paper that we started to question how it all came about.

49. I have learned to now push back against doctors when it comes to my children's health, but you could not have done that with doctors back then. I question decisions and diagnosis a lot more closely.

50. My daughter says she wouldn't give blood now because what happened to my dad has put her off. I worked for the NHS for many years, so I don't believe that kind of thing can happen nowadays but how do you convince those outside the organisation who have lost so much?

51. I find it shocking if it is true that some places may have gotten rid of records on purpose. I see it as a possible cover-up of what has really happened. As mentioned, I worked for the NHS for years, and I do know they don't like to admit when they are wrong.

Statement of Truth

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

Signed GRO-C _____

Dated 09/06/21