Witness Name: Christopher Birch
Statement No: WITN4173001
Exhibits: 0
Dated: May 2020

INFECTED BLOOD INQUIRY

FIRST WRITTEN STATEMENT OF CHRISTOPHER BIRCH

I, Christopher Birch, will say as follows:-

Section 1. Introduction

1. My name is Christopher Birch. I was born on GRO-C 1956 and I live at GRO-C GRO-C, Lancashire GRO-C

2. My stepson, Simon Matthew Helm (born on GRO-C 1977), was co-infected with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and the Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) through contaminated blood products. He died after contracting pneumonia in addition to cardiomyopathy on 21st June 1995, aged 18.

3. This witness statement has been prepared without the benefit of access to Simon's full medical records.

4. My wife, Margaret Birch, has provided her own Witness Statement to the Inquiry (WITN3936001).

Section 2. How Affected

5. Simon had severe Haemophilia A. He was treated at the Liverpool Paediatric Haemophilia Centre at the Alder Hey Children's Hospital. I would collect Simon's Factor VIIII (FVIII) treatment from the Royal Liverpool Hospital when he started to have home treatment.

6. In August 1985 Margaret received a letter from Dr Martin at Alder Hey to advise us that Simon had tested positive for HTLVIII antibodies. The letter we received (as exhibited to Margaret's Statement) downplayed the diagnosis and advised that 'most people' with HTLVIII antibodies 'do indeed remain well and never develop features of AIDS'. Up until then we didn't know anything. We were then invited to a seminar at the hospital in September for the families of haemophiliacs on the subject of AIDS.

7. Margaret and I went to the seminar. The room was full with something like 70 to 100 family members. Two doctors (Dr Martin and one other) were sat at a table on a platform with a number of very upset people below them asking questions to which there were no answers. It didn't dawn on me and Margaret at first what was going on. The other families appeared to be ahead of us. The meeting became very heated and very emotional.

8. We were never advised of any risk associated with FVIII concentrate. The word of the doctors was Gospel to us. They were all very matter of fact in how they addressed us and I remember Dr Martin being almost abrupt in his manner. I remember seeing the World in Action programme in the early 1980s and thinking 'this would never happen to Simon' and in a few years it had.

9. After the seminar, things started to improve at the Haemophilia Centre with more resources to include social workers, more doctors and more specialist nurses. There seemed to be more concern for Simon generally.

10. We knew nothing about Simon having HCV until it was mentioned in a letter bearing the date 5th April 1994. Margaret has exhibited a copy of that letter to her Statement.

Section 3. Other Infections

11. I do not believe that Simon was infected with anything other than HIV and HCV.

Section 4. Consent

12. Simon was tested for infection without his mother's consent.

Section 5. Impact of the Infection

13. I met Margaret and became step-father to Simon in 1981 when he was four years old. We had a fantastic relationship. He was a very active boy and very sporty. He loved football. He and his mother were Everton supporters and I am a Liverpool fan. There were jokes and jibes between us over that when we went to the Everton games. He joined the Cubs and then the Scouts and then became a member of the Adventure Scouts. He ran the tuck shop there. I used to take Simon to his squash lessons and we went fishing together. Like his mother, he was very tidy. He liked everything in place. His fishing box was very well organised. My fishing box, in comparison, was then in a jumble. I now keep it in a tidy and organised manner. I learned that from Simon. He was a child and I didn't realise how much he influenced me until stopping to reflect upon it.

14. Simon became less active at the age of about 13. The decline in his health became insidious over time from there and he never matured physically beyond that age, only mentally. His strength went over a period of years.

15. Simon was a lovely lad. He and his mother were very close. Margaret was very protective of Simon. She did not want others to speak about Simon's

illness in front of him and I observed her wishes. She wanted to distract Simon from thoughts of it. I have always thought that Simon knew more than he let on to his mother or to me.

16. I was working shifts as a newly qualified paramedic. I focused on that and upon trying to keep us afloat financially. Simon enjoyed going on holiday and he loved Florida. We went 3 times over a period of 5 years to Disney World and Universal Studios. Simon would plan our holiday itinerary, the days we would have at each theme park and the days at the poolside. He enjoyed it and we let him do it. We just went with it. Working for the NHS I was only really entitled to one significant block period of holiday each year. I told my senior boss at work about Simon and he was very supportive. I purchased a touring caravan and we could then have at least one long weekend break each month because of work commitments. My boss also allowed me to take my holiday in 2 two week blocks. We could have two weeks in Devon and two weeks in Florida. It wasn't cheap and we built up debt. We made the most of our leisure time together. We wanted Simon to be happy. We had some very happy times on holiday and at football matches.

17. In terms of stigma, only those close to us knew that Simon was infected with HIV. We didn't discuss it with people. No-one in our neighbourhood knew. Simon was a happy boy. We were lucky. We were aware that some parents had a very different experience and encountered some horrific examples of stigma.

18. Loosing Simon in the manner we did was devastating. Friends have since told me that I became quite an angry person for the first few years after Simon's death. It has now been 25 years since we lost him and you become numb. There is no going back to anything like normal. I do my best to support Margaret. She used to like to dance and all that just stopped when Simon died. It took Margaret a very long time before she got back to being even a very small part of herself. It is important to us to tell Simon's story but I still find it incredibly hard to talk about it.

Section 6. Treatment/care/support

19. At one of the Inquiry meetings in Liverpool we met other families we hadn't seen in years. Like us, some had lost children. It struck me that they are very much stuck in that awful time and it is very upsetting to see that. You can never get over anything like what we have experienced.

20. We knew nothing about blood viruses back then. The treatment options (various medications) weren't discussed or offered. Simon was given his treatment. We relied on the clinicians at the hospital and were very thankful for their kindness.

21. The boys still alive are now middle aged. In retrospect, I can't help but wonder whether there might have been several different treatments with the boys still alive getting the correct one.

22. We had a good relationship with those responsible for Simon's care at the Haemophilia Centre but we weren't offered counselling or psychological support.

Section 7. Financial Assistance

23. I refer to Margaret's Statement.

Section 8. Other Issues

24. There are so many questions that need answering to include 'what medical and scientific advice was given to the decision makers?'; 'Was the advice acted upon and why?'; 'Who made the decision?'; 'Who decided to make use of blood products sourced from multiple donors?'; 'Did the product come from the USA?'; 'Why was it not screened?' and 'Was it decided to spend the money that should have been allocated on something else and if so, what?'

Anonymity

25. I am not seeking anonymity. 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 ....

Dated ....9 . 6 . 20 . ...