

Witness Name: Francesco. M. Casella

Statement No. WITN7394001

Exhibits: Nil

Dated: 13 / 04 / 2023

## **INFECTED BLOOD INQUIRY**

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### **WRITTEN WITNESS STATEMENT**

**OF**

**FRANCESCO MICHAEL CASELLA**

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I provide this statement in response to a request under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules, 2006 dated 6<sup>th</sup> December, 2022.

I, Francesco Michael Casella, will say as follows:-

#### **Section One - Introduction**

1. My full name is Francesco Michael Casella, but I prefer to be known as 'Mike.' I was born on GRO-C 1960 in Cardiff, Wales, and am a married man living with my wife at an address that is known to the Infected Blood Inquiry. I have two children both of whom are now adults. I am a self-employed consultant offering quality assurance, validation, business resilience and product testing services to corporate clients.
2. My parents, both sadly now deceased, were Armando Carmelo Casella GRO-C 1930 to 25/11/1990) and his wife Elizabeth Anne Casella GRO-C 1931 to 03/11/2022). This statement concerns my father Armando, who having contracted Hepatitis B (also known as Hep' B and / or HbV), died at just 60 years of age.

3. My parents had two children, my elder sister and I. Having lost my father, my mother was a lady who wanted to provide the Infected Blood Inquiry with a witness statement, but passed away in advance of her having been able to do so. I have therefore come forward to provide a statement, detailing in so far as I am able, what happened to my father, and the impact of his illness and subsequent death for our family - on behalf of our family and especially my mother, who had to live without my dad for over thirty years.
4. I say 'in so far as I am able,' as many of the events with which my statement is concerned took place a long time ago, and at a time when I was only a child or relatively young person. As such, and in the absence of any medical notes which I may otherwise have sought to rely upon, I am unable to provide any more detail to that now given, as memories fade as the years pass by, but I have discussed the matter with my sister, to assist me.
5. My father was an Italian National, born in GRO-C in the Calabria region of Southern Italy, where he grew up alongside two sisters. He was a fit and healthy young man, with no known health problems, and no history of any blood borne ailments (such as Haemophilia) within the family. He completed mandatory National Service, and then he and his siblings separated, with one sister leaving Italy to live in Canada, the other remaining in Italy and my dad travelling to the United Kingdom.
6. Having developed a desire to travel following his military service, my father came to the U.K. in 1955, initially in search of work. Here he found work in the steelworks, and there having been a large number of major steel plants along the banks of the River Severn, especially in and around Cardiff, he settled there.
7. It was here, whilst living in digs in 1956, that he met our mother, a local girl from Cardiff, who was working locally as a Civil Servant. In 1957 they married and took up residence together in the Grangetown area of the city, where they were to remain for many years and where my sister and I grew up.

8. Later, as the steel industry went into decline, my father changed jobs to become a machine operator, but it was still a quite physically demanding job, just as his employment in the steelworks had been. However, he was a strong, fit and hardworking man, and as a child, dad always appeared well to my sister and I.
9. Dad was a typical working-class man operating in a hard industry where the tenet of '*work hard, play hard*' was commonplace. As such he enjoyed his food, and the occasional drink, but at no time exposed himself to any of what may be considered 'risk factors' associated with Hepatitis infection, irrespective of their type. He was a hard-working, family man who doted on his children and very much loved and cared for his wife.
10. My mother was a fit and healthy lady who, just like our dad, had no underlying health issues and had not exposed herself to any risk factors. Both my sister and I were born healthy, and grew up as fit and healthy children with no underlying health conditions inherited through our parents.
11. All passed well within our household until in his early fifties, dad became unwell, on a couple of occasions in quick succession to one another, something that was quite unusual as he had never been taken poorly before. He started to experience chest pains, and both he and our mother worried that he had problems with his heart.
12. Our family General Practitioner (GP) initially considered what may have been happening and instigated some tests, as a result of which he was referred to our local general hospital in Cardiff. Here it was found that dad had a problem with his Mitral Valve of his heart (also known as the Bicuspid Valve). It was defective and surgery was required to replace it.
13. This was not an operation that could have been undertaken 'there-and-then,' as there was a waiting list, so as he was deemed well enough to wait and put onto a National Health Service waiting list, to have the operation at some time in the future.

14. At this time, as a Civil Servant, my mother had healthcare cover as one of the 'perks' of her service. Unwilling to wait, especially as no one seemed to know for how long that could be, as the health plan extended to her spouse, my parents decided to use the policy so that dad could have his operation at the earliest opportunity.
15. Using mother's Benenden Healthcare cover, father was sent to London for his operation, which was a big deal for him and for us at that time, as London was where all of the 'specialist' hospitals were, and it meant a lot of travelling, when as a family we didn't really travel too far at all.
16. The Mitral Valve Replacement operation was conducted at the Royal Brompton Hospital in Chelsea in the summer of 1982, when dad was just fifty-two years of age. He had the surgery he needed, which was apparently successful in so far as the valve was concerned, and having been kept in hospital for about three weeks to recover sufficiently prior to release, was discharged home to continue his recuperation from what had been major surgery for that time.
17. By now my sister had married and moved out of the family home to establish her own household with her husband, but I was still living at home, aged twenty-two. My sister drove to London to collect dad from the hospital and bring him home to convalesce.
18. Initially, all appeared to well, with dad and his health, and he seemed to be making a slow but steady recovery, getting better day-by-day so to speak, but not long after he returned home, things started going downhill.
19. My father went through a phase where he seemed to be ill all of the time, simply feeling poorly or actually being unwell, and suffering badly with whatever may have been going around, coughs, colds, flu or whatever, when hitherto he had always shrugged these things off or not caught them at all.

20. Prior to heart surgery, in so far as I am aware, dad had never taken a day off work on account of illness. Following surgery, he found it extremely hard to return to the workplace, as he was so frequently unwell.
21. On at least one occasion he appeared clearly jaundiced, as his skin had visibly 'yellowed,' which was a cause of great concern to us all. Having become jaundiced, dad had to be admitted to the Llandough Hospital in Cardiff, where he remained an inpatient for a week or two. It was whilst he was being treated here that tests revealed him to have contracted Hepatitis B.
22. At the time my parents were told that Armando had what was referred to as Acquired Antigen Hepatitis, an ailment that was later referred to as Hepatitis B.
23. None of us knew or understood *how* he could have contracted Hep' B, as following his discharge from the Royal Brompton Hospital, he had hardly been anywhere, and since having returned home, had not been exposed to any risks – it had to have been caught elsewhere.
24. The clinicians treating my father, in trying to discover *how* he had become infected as Hep' B was apparently uncommon, asked him if he had ever had a blood transfusion? We told them that he had recently had heart valve replacement surgery, and as this had been an open-heart procedure, they deduced that it was more than likely that he would have had to have been given blood, by way of transfusion, at the time, and this they identified as having been the source of his HbV infection as there was no other possible cause.
25. None of us knew what 'Australian Antigen' was, so we had to look it up ourselves, as best as we could, which wasn't easy as there were no internet search facilities available to us then, and certainly not as there are today. The clinicians didn't appear to know too much about HbV themselves, as they didn't, or couldn't, provide us with any useful information themselves.
26. Neither of my parents really understood what Hepatitis B was, and were almost completely in the dark as to its seriousness and risk that was / is associated with this virus, but ignorance can be bliss sometimes, as at least they weren't unduly frightened by the gravity of his condition.



### **Section Three - Other Infections**

27. In so far as I am aware, my father did not contract any additional viruses, diseases or other ailments as a result of him having been given blood, and I am unaware of his having been exposed to any others.

### **Section Four - Consent**

28. I cannot comment upon any issues of consent, in particular as to what he may or may not have been told, or asked to consent to, at the Royal Brompton Hospital as I wasn't there and wasn't subsequently told. All I can say, from what we were told at the Llandough Hospital and understood about the way in which his operation would have been conducted, is that with or without his consent he would have required a blood transfusion, although we didn't know this had taken place ourselves.

29. I don't even know if my father knew, or had been told, that he was either going to require blood during the operation, or that he had been given some following the operation – if he did, he didn't tell us.

### **Section Five - Impact**

30. Shortly after he found out that he had HbV, dad had to stop working as his continuing ill health meant that he could no longer cope with the physical demands of his job. His employers chose to 'let him go,' on ill health grounds, and having lost his job he had to resort to benefits as a means of support. His unemployment and continuing ill health had a major financial impact upon both of my parents as he had been the major breadwinner.

31. The resultant shortfall in their income impacted directly upon their lifestyle and activities, and the ability to do things as they had before, although they tried to maintain as normal a life as possible.

32. Hep' B had a major impact upon my father physically as well, as he basically became an invalid in his early fifties, going from a strong, fit, hard-working man, to someone who became very frail and vulnerable over a very short period of time. It was difficult for him to accept, and very hard for my mother, sister and I to understand.
33. My father visibly aged considerably, certainly well before his time, and appeared to me rather 'wizened,' which was in stark contrast to his appearance prior to the operation. He had always been strong and independent, undertaking a physically demanding job, day after day, without any difficulties, but suddenly he was weak, frail and forever falling foul of a cough, cold, or just generally being unwell most of the time. He went from active to inactive very swiftly.
34. In a very short space of time, post Hepatitis B diagnosis, my father additionally developed Late-Onset Diabetes, which merely added to the health issues he was facing and which again impacted upon his quality of life.
35. My father found that he had to endure a great many discomforts as a result of HbV infection, he ate less, his appetite was reduced, and he found it difficult to go to the lavatory.
36. The jaundice he had experienced returned a couple of times, and he had to go into hospital as a result, but when he did, those treating him would place him in isolation, and give him his own room, but in so doing single him out from other patients.
37. He found that he had to be attended by doctors and nurses always wearing full personal protective equipment (PPE), such as it was in the 1980's, at the very least always a mask, gloves and an apron as a minimum requirement, for fear of cross-contamination. When he was admitted, they adopted a practise of barrier nursing. Each time his jaundice recovered, but he still had Hepatitis B, for which there appeared to be no treatment plan. He just had to endure it.

38. He'd always enjoyed 'a pint,' but had to stop drinking almost entirely, due to both his having Hep' B and Diabetes. He had also enjoyed an occasional flutter at the bookmakers, but that too ceased when he found it difficult going out, and in any event it was money he could ill afford to gamble with.
39. He tried to manage his lifestyle to offset the impact of diabetes, and generally did so quite well, but I recall his feet having turned brown in colour and various other problems with tiredness and circulation issues in particular.
40. My father's mental health was also impacted by the infection and the situation it left him in, and he would from time to time become depressed when things that were happening got the better of him, leaving him down. My mother always sought to lift his spirits, doing her best to cheer him up, and encouraged us to do the same, which we tried to do, but it was at times quite difficult as he felt that he had lost everything, save for his family.
41. As his condition worsened, mum had to give up work herself, to care for him full-time, and was lucky enough to have been able to take part in some sort of early retirement scheme offered to civil servants at the time, although this would most probably have impacted upon her pension, their income, and as a consequence, their lifestyle.
42. My father, his wife and children aside, had no family of his own living in the United Kingdom. My parents had always enjoyed travelling to Italy to see his mother and sister (who had both remained in GRO-C), and he had even driven there in the past, then flew when it became too much, but that all had to stop, and whereas they would have spent a month at a time in Italy, with dad showing mum around and meeting with family and old friends, he was reduced to maintaining contact by telephone, which with calling Canada or Italy, was costly.
43. My mother having taken early retirement to make the most of their remaining years together, found that this was only to be for a very short time, as he passed away within just two years of her retiring.



44. At first, he tried to cope alone, then our mother would assist him, but towards the end he was assisted by nurses who would call at the house, but mum remained his primary carer, doing as much as she possibly could for him, which was a considerable burden upon her, both physically and emotionally as she saw his condition worsening before her.
45. My mother would prepare his medication for him, and every day he had to take a lot of tablets. He had been unwell and deteriorating over a considerable period, but when his death finally came, it nevertheless came as an incredible shock to her, and us all.
46. Armando hadn't received an adverse prognosis approaching his death, and so none of us had been able to prepare for his passing, which happened in hospital. When he was admitted, we all thought that the situation would play out as it had always done before - he was unwell, but he'd be well looked after in hospital, he would undoubtedly rally, and then be discharged home after a fairly brief stay as an inpatient.
47. With his death, at the age of sixty, my mother lost someone she had been close to for over thirty years. His death came as a huge blow and she missed him immensely. They had met when she was twenty-five and then spent thirty-two years together before he passed away. My mother then lived on for a further thirty-two years without him, alone – it never came into her mind that she may meet someone else, that she may find love again or even remarry. There had only ever been one man for my mother, Armando, and with his passing she was devastated, she was only fifty-nine years old.

48. Whereas my father had been very manual by nature, someone who engaged in physical work and actions, so my mother was far more academic in her ways and employment – he was very capable, and would get things done, but she would have thought what needed doing in the first place and set him to it. They had been a perfect match for one another and happy lifelong partners, despite being as chalk and cheese by type, enjoying one another's company and getting on brilliantly together. His passing left a huge gap in her life, and those of my sister and I.
49. Following his death, our mother would try to keep herself busy, doing things to occupy her time and amuse her, joining friends or getting engaged with different groups or societies, but it didn't prevent her from becoming quite lonely and upset at times.
50. Our mother had never driven, that was always seen as having been dad's job, so she never learned. With his ill health and then passing, she suffered as regards simple things like basic mobility, and simply going to and from the shops became a chore as she had to use buses and taxis, and again this came at a cost.
51. Although she became quite sad at times, she tried not to allow herself to become beaten down by what had happened, she coped, and as a strong character and independent woman she just got on with things, never seeking help, but always trying to occupy her time.
52. Fortunately, mum was able to find some comfort in her own mother. My grandmother was still alive when dad passed away, and had become a widow herself in her fifties, so she knew something of what our mother was going through and could empathise with her. She proved to be a good source of support and, like mum herself, lived on to be ninety as well.
53. Although I had myself moved out of our family home when my father died, I had not gone very far, and so was able to visit regularly and did whatever I could to try to lift mum's spirits or make her life a little easier for her.

54. As dad had been so unwell, and had always been the person who did the odd jobs around the house, things had become a little neglected, so I started doing them. I'd undertake some decorating here, a repair or two there, the basic care and maintenance which she couldn't do or afford to pay for, herself. I even fitted a new kitchen for her. In a small way I would like to think that my father would be happy to see what I had done, to help mum and cheer her up.
55. Providing direct support for our mother like this was a little more difficult for my sister, who lived further away and couldn't just 'pop in' as I could, but she'd visit or our mum would travel to stay with her, and we were very much together as a family in our efforts to help her.
56. Looking back, I am rather saddened by the fact that as his son, I never took the opportunity of having those 'father-and-son' chats with my dad, but we didn't have that sort of a relationship. There have been certain things that, with the benefit of hindsight, I would have loved to have spoken about with him, but never did, there were missed opportunities I regret not having taken, but I never thought to do so at the time – always believing that there'd be time to do so in the future, but sadly, we ran out of time.
57. There have been a lot of occasions since his death when I've found myself wanting his guidance or advice, and I feel very sad for his having been taken from us, especially at such a young age.
58. My father, in spite of his having left his family in Italy as a young man, was all the same a family man and remained close to his sisters although they were all distanced from one another. He was lucky enough to have been able to meet my sister's children, and my first child who was born just a few months before he died, which he loved, and he held any of the time he had spent with them very close to his heart. Sadly, other grandchildren never got to meet him, and they all grew up without ever really getting to know their grandfather.

59. My sister and I lost our father in our early twenties. So many family landmarks have taken place without him since then, and it is often hard not to reflect on what he would have made of us, of our families, and of what we have done or are doing.
60. Both of my parents came from a generation of people who were never really great complainers, they would just adapt, adjust, and carry on, no matter what was placed before them, they just got on with it. They both felt that it had been unfortunate that dad had become infected, and mum was quite angry at first, but they adapted and adjusted, learned to live with it as best they could, and didn't complain. They never really expressed any resent for what had happened.
61. Changes had to be made at home, which made everyone a little uncomfortable, but for safety's sake, and to avoid any risk of him passing Hepatitis B to anyone else, his flannel, towel and shaving kit were kept separate from everything else, and no one else would touch them. Our parents became very careful in what they did and how they went about doing it.
62. It was a mere eight years between the heart operation and my father's death. As these years passed, his health slowly declined, and he was hospitalised on a number of occasions, on predominantly HbV related matters.

## **Section Six                      -                      Treatment / Care / Support**

63. We were all far more upset by the fact that that we had lost Armando than we were about *how* it had come about, but looking back, some counselling, perhaps bereavement counselling or other psychological support may have been useful, either for mum and dad once he had been diagnosed and then went into decline; or for my sister, mother and I once he had been taken from us. However, none was ever offered.

64. To the best of my knowledge, my father's Hepatitis B infection was never treated, although some of the symptoms and / or other ailments he succumbed to, were addressed. My father was told that there was no effective treatment for HbV, but that he may become clear of it himself, given time.
65. I think that our mother was tested for hepatitis, which couldn't have been very nice for her, and which would have been a worry for him, but fortunately it had not been passed on.
66. In the end, father was taken into hospital with Sepsis having been unwell for a while and in some pain. The glands in his neck, by his shoulders were also noticeably swollen. Having been admitted on a Friday, a junior doctor attending him told us quite categorically, that he could have been suffering with a number of different complaints, but that whatever it may have been, "*...its not cancer.*"
67. On the Sunday immediately after this, he passed away. We were then told that he had been suffering with Disseminated Cancer, contrary to what had been said previously. The first doctor, who had told us that it wasn't cancer, was mortified at having given us the wrong information.
68. We were led to believe that he may well have developed liver cancer, and that this had most probably spread elsewhere, hence the disseminated cancer diagnosis.
69. His doctors sought to explore this theory, using a post mortem examination to secure suitable samples for testing, but our mother refused to allow them to do this, taking a view that dad had spent far too long going in and out of hospital, far too long being 'poked and prodded' by someone or another, and had spent far too long suffering – to find out what had happened wouldn't bring him back, so she wanted him left alone as, in her eyes, he was finally at peace.
70. My father's death certificate noted his cause of death as having been Disseminated Cancer, with no mention of any heart issue or of Hepatitis as I believe that there should have been.



71. I feel that my parents, not being given to asking too many questions of doctors and nurses, and who accepted what they may have been told, were not very well acquainted with the various ailments he faced, and were undoubtedly talked down to, to some extent, by the clinicians treating my father, so their ignorance as to what may have really been going on was maintained. Unless something was pretty straightforward, they didn't really understand.

## **Section Seven - Financial**

72. Neither of my parents ever pursued any form of claim for financial assistance and / or compensation as a result of my father having been infected with Hepatitis B.
73. My father had to undergo assessment for disability benefit once he had lost his job, but fortunately qualified. He had never asked anyone for any form of help throughout his entire working life, and didn't like having to go through the process, but mum understood the system and was able to advise and assist him.
74. Our mother had been an Executive Officer (EO) within the DHSS prior to taking early retirement, following which she had a civil service pension to support her. She also successfully applied for an attendance allowance, although even though she had worked as she had, my sister and I had to encourage her to do so.
75. Financially, times were quite hard for my parents when dad became unwell, they had never really had a great deal of money, but got by, and had a little disposable income available to them each month, but once he had to cease work money became tight, and worsened when mum had to stop working as well. As such, some financial assistance would have gone a long way to helping them at that stage of their lives.

**Section Eight      -      Other**

76. I believe that it has been a good thing for me to have had the opportunity to tell our story, as I know that my mother would have wanted to do so had she been able, and I had promised her that I would. I thought, when entering this process, that thirty years was a long time, and that with time there would have been some healing, so I'd be able to cope, but the mere process of providing a statement has, at times, prove to be quite an emotional experience.
77. I don't doubt that my mother would have been able to provide more information than I, but sadly she is unable to do so. In an effort to provide more detailed information, including dates, places, doctors etc., I have contacted the various hospitals concerned, seeking copies of my late father's medical records, but have been unable to secure any – apparently, they have all been disposed of.
78. In more recent times, for unrelated health reasons, I have had to receive blood transfusions myself, and have found it quite chilling to think of the risks that were posed by this fairly simple, regularly used, procedure - risks of the recipient being given HIV and / or different forms of Hepatitis. Although reassured by my clinicians that 'no risk' now exists, this hasn't always been the case. and there's remains that doubt in your mind when you have experienced the loss of a loved one, as I have.

**Statement Of Truth**

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

Signed:

GRO-C

Dated:

13/04/2023