Witness Name: David O'Connell
Statement No: WITN5358001
Exhibits: **0**
Dated: 18th NOVEMBER 2021

INFECTED BLOOD INQUIRY

WRITTEN STATEMENT OF DAVID O'CONNELL

I provide this statement in response to a request under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006 dated 21 February 2021

I, David O'Connell, will say as follows: -

Section 1. Introduction

1. My name is David O'Connell. My date of birth is GRO-C 1951 and my full address is known to the Inquiry. I am married and live in GRO-C, London. I work as a Hackney cab driver.

2. I intend to speak about my father's infection with hepatitis C (HCV). In particular, the nature of his illness, how the illness affected him and the impact it had on his life.

3. I am giving this statement with the assistance of my brother Paul O'Connell, who has helped me recollect certain aspects of our father's life.

4. I am not legally represented and I do not wish to seek anonymity.

Section 2. How Affected

5. My father's name was Albert Thomas O'Connell and his date of birth was the GRO-C 1921. He was born in GRO-C, London and lived in the area his whole life, as did my mother Elsie Lillian O'Connell. My brother Paul and I called our father Bert, and Paul's children would refer to him as Grandad Bertie.

6. Bert had Von Willebrand's disease and had suffered from bleeding issues throughout his life. He had 3 brothers and 3 sisters, but none of them had the disease. His parents also did not have a history of Von Willebrand's disease so it seemed to start with him, although we have not looked back very far to see if anyone further up the family tree had this disease.

7. Bert's Von Willebrand's disease was something my brother Paul and I had known about since we were young children, GRO-C

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8. Bert had been in the army during the war and had been invalided out of the army on account of his bleeding problems. Mum was aware of his bleeding issues before they got married, as she had mentioned the nose bleeds he would suffer from in the early days.

9. Bert worked as a sales representative for a company called London and Midland Scaffolding, which I believe no longer exists. He had worked there since he was a boy and was there up until he took early retirement around the age of 60. I think his employer may have suggested that he take early retirement due to his bleeding issues and ill health.

10. When Bert reached the age of 65, there was a dispute with the company who said Dad had agreed to not receive his pension after this point, when he decided to retire early. Of course, Bert had not agreed to this, and the matter ended up in court. Thankfully Bert won his case, but it was unfortunate that after working at the company his whole life, things ended on bad terms.

11. Bert often suffered from nose bleeds GRO-C, and GRO-C had to go to the old Westminster Hospital (no longer exists) in order to have dental treatment due to the risk of bleeding. It never felt like anything out of the ordinary for us as a family and I think we all just accepted their bleeding issues as the way things were.

12. GRO-C issues with bleeding GRO-C it seemed to affect Bert his whole life. GRO-C GRO-C GRO-C. The severity of Von Willebrand's related bleeding issues seems to be dependent on the individual GRO-C GRO-C.

13. Bert would suffer bleeds every few months. Sometimes he did not bother going into hospital if he could control it at home, but he did end up in hospital fairly regularly. On many occasions he would end up having to stay in hospital for a week or 10 days, but on other occasions, if he had a less severe nose bleed for example, they would just pack his nose and send him home.

14. I remember Bert would often be in hospital during holiday periods like Christmas or Easter time. I'm not sure if I am just remembering that more as they were significant days, but even Paul remembers often taking his children down to see Bert in hospital over Christmas.

15. When Bert went to the old Westminster Hospital for a bleeding issue, he was usually treated with Factor VIII. I also remember the term

cryoprecipitate, which he may have been treated with at some point. Bert would have had countless amounts of Factor VIII treatment, as well as regular blood transfusions. Every time we went to visit him in hospital he'd have a cannula in his arm.

16. Bert was in hospital so regularly that the doctors and nurses knew him very well. If they had a spare private room they would give it to him. It felt like he was getting an upgrade, as you would with frequent flier miles! If he was in a ward, Bert would talk to everyone as he was very friendly.

17. Although I never met him, there was another man called GRO-A GRO-A that Bert knew who also had a bleeding disorder and would attend the Westminster Hospital regularly. I'm not sure if they would discuss anything to do with their treatment, but they might have shared information.

18. On one occasion in around 1980, Bert was in a large ward at the Old Westminster Hospital and he had an Irish patient in the bed next to him, who he had become very friendly with. During a blood transfusion Bert was having, he turned over to the Irish patient and said something like 'I'm not feeling too clever'. This patient noticed Bert had become red, blotchy and seemed very unwell, so he immediately called the nurses over.

19. The nurses rushed over to Bert and realised he was having a bad reaction to the blood; apparently, he looked like a lobster. I believe they stopped the transfusion at that point, and he later referred to this incident as receiving 'a dodgy batch of blood'. I had been on holiday when this incident occurred, and did not realise how unwell Bert had been.

20. Although Bert reacted very badly from this transfusion, he never complained to the hospital and did not want to make any waves as he

had been at the hospital as man and boy, and had always felt very grateful for their care.

21. As Bert reacted so severely to this transfusion, I believe there is a chance that this is when he contracted HCV. However, Bert received Factor VIII and blood transfusions countless times over the years, so it would be almost impossible to pin point when this occurred. I remember once a doctor said that Bert had received so much blood in his lifetime that none of the blood in his body was his.

22. Paul and I are not sure exactly when Bert became jaundiced, but sometime after coming home from the hospital following this incident, he had started going yellow. I'm not sure if he was still working by this point, or whether he had already taken early retirement, but it caused him to be bed bound for some time.

23. At the time we just thought he was suffering from basic jaundice and it was not very serious, and it was only later we realised how ill Bert had really become. I remember visiting Bert and he would normally want to look at the paper and put a bet on, but he was too unwell to do this so we knew he was really unwell.

24. At the beginning of Bert's infection and jaundice, the medical staff were very non-committal about what he had wrong with him. If they had mentioned hepatitis from the onset, I don't think it was made clear that it was a serious issue. We knew about hepatitis A and B, and they were never considered that serious. I'm not sure when he became aware of the fact that he had HCV specifically, but he did tell us about it at some stage, although I still don't think any of us realised how serious it was.

Section 3. Other Infections

25. I am not aware of whether Bert had become infected with any other infections. The doctors were aware of the risk of HIV through blood and

blood products by the time he was diagnosed with HCV, so I assume he was tested for HIV around this time.

Section 4. Consent

26. I'm not aware if Bert was asked for consent before being tested for HCV or anything else.

27. Bert was never made aware of the risks associated with Factor VIII and the blood transfusions he was being given, or asked to consent to his treatment with specific knowledge of these risks. Both Paul and I, as well as our mother would visit him in hospital daily, and would have been aware of any risks he had been warned about.

28. As far as I am aware, Bert only came to know about the risks associated with Factor VIII and the fact that blood products were being made using infected American blood much later, potentially after seeing something on television. I don't think he was informed of these risks by the doctors and nurses treating him.

Section 5. Impact

29. Bert had always been in and out of hospital due to his Von Willebrand's disease, and I don't think he understood that HCV was a very serious infection that could impact his health drastically. It was really difficult to get any information from the doctors treating Bert about exactly what was wrong with him.

30. Bert may have been told he had non-specific hepatitis or something like that, but we were kept in the dark for quite some time about the fact that it was HCV, and a condition far more serious than other types

of hepatitis. I had a friend that had Hepatitis B, and although he had a rough couple of weeks, he fully recovered from it and we thought Bert would be the same.

31. Although I cannot pinpoint exactly when he was told that he had HCV, I believe his exact diagnosis was not confirmed for a number of years. Whenever we asked to speak to a doctor, they would always send out a young lad to deal with the questions and would not allow you to speak to the main doctor.

32. Bert just always referred to the fact that he had received 'bad blood' to explain his HCV infection. I do not recall Bert ever having a liver biopsy, and I do not remember liver damage or cirrhosis ever being mentioned in terms of his health.

33. Once Bert was informed about his HCV, I believe he would have been told the precautions he should take to avoid infecting others. However, we never had any specific conversations about this with him. My brother recalls that Bert was very wary of cuddling his grandchildren. He had been managing his bleeds for years so knew how to handle his blood on his own.

34. I know Bert was told to stop drinking for about 6 months by his doctor, but I do not recall him having treatment for his HCV or mentioning this to us, so I'm not sure why I have 6 months in my head. I remember Bert went to the pub and had an orange juice instead during this time.

35. He would go to the pub every evening for a pint as it was just below where we lived, and he enjoyed the social aspect of it, so not being able to drink would have been quite hard. He may have had a few drinks when he wasn't supposed to, but he did try to stick to it.

36. Bert was never the type of person to go for a run, and he wasn't the most active person. However, he would still go for walks up and down

the embankment even after the HCV diagnosis so I don't think the HCV impacted that part of his life significantly. He also seemed quite sharp until the end.

37. Bert had never been on holidays abroad, as he was worried about suffering a bleed while away. Therefore, he was not really applying for travel insurance or anything like that following his diagnosis with HCV.

38. After he took early retirement, Bert started doing voluntary work informally at the Westminster Hospital, helping collate files and things like that. He dressed smartly so I think a lot of people mistook him for a surgeon! He wanted to give something back to the hospital, as he felt he had received so much care and support from them.

39. Bert was treated at the Westminster Hospital throughout his life, and I remember that Professor Brian Gazzard was his doctor. I think he was actually treating Bert even prior to his diagnosis with HCV and the incident with the 'bad blood', as I recall seeing him at the cinema and recognising him prior to 1980. As I'm aware he is now a specialist in infectious diseases at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, I'm not sure in what capacity he was treating Bert during these years.

40. Although Paul recalls Bert having barrier nursing on some occasions, usually he was in a general ward or if they had a spare one, they would offer him a private room. I do not know if they were aware about how infectious HCV was, and whether they were taking precautions we were just unaware of.

41. I don't think Bert suffered from any stigma associated with HCV and it did not affect anything with his mates that he would see for a drink. My parents were not really that social and did not go out a great deal before the HCV diagnosis, so this aspect of their life did not change a great deal. At the time we were not aware of the negative associations linked to HCV.

42. I do think Bert's HCV would have affected Mum, but it is difficult to tell because he had always been in hospital so often with the Von Willebrand's associated bleeds that I think she was used to his regular hospital visits. I think it would have been more of a concern that he could potentially be infectious.

43. In around September 1992, Bert was in Westminster Hospital when he was diagnosed with oesophageal cancer. I remember that he called and told me the news, and asked me to go and tell my Mum. I just did not know how to break this news to her.

44. Bert had struggled with acid reflux for a long time and he used to take Rennies Indigestion tablets for this. I'm not sure if he took any prescribed medication for this issue, but Paul remembers him also taking a chalky liquid. I'm not sure if this acid reflux was linked in any way to the cancer. I'm also not sure if HCV could have been contributory to him developing cancer.

45. Around a month after his diagnosis with oesophageal cancer, on the 7th of October 1992, Bert went into the Westminster Hospital for an operation to remove the cancer. Sadly, the surgeons were unable to stop some bleeding that occurred during the operation and Bert passed away. I do not know if the HCV could have weakened his overall health and could be linked to his cancer and death.

46. Paul remembers speaking to a different blood specialist doctor after Bert's death who seemed visibly surprised that Bert had died in this way, so I'm not sure if there had been an error made in the way Bert had been treated during this surgery.

47. After Bert's death, we felt it would be indelicate to discuss it all in detail with Mum, as she had already suffered the loss of her husband and we did not want to bring it all up again. However, at the time we did not know much about HCV or the impact it really had on Bert's health.

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Section 6. Treatment/Care/Support

51. I am not sure if Bert struggled to get treatment for the HCV and if he was ever offered anything. I do not remember him ever being on a course of HCV treatment, so I don't know if this was something he should have had.

52. I do not know if Bert was offered any psychological support or counselling, but I very much doubt that he would have taken it even if it had been offered.

Section 7. Financial Assistance

53. As far as I am aware, Bert was never informed of the possibility of claiming any financial assistance to support him and our Mum,

following his diagnosis with HCV. If Bert had been told about the relevant funds, he would have definitely let Paul and I know, so we could have helped in making an application for this.

54. In around 2014, I was at a party with my wife's side of the family when coincidently I got chatting to Nick Fish, the son in law of a cousin of my mother in law. He told me that he worked for the Skipton Fund and what they did, and I told him that dad had Von Willebrand's disease and had contracted HCV as a result of blood transfusions and the use of Factor VIII. He informed me that Bert would have been entitled to financial assistance, and that I should apply on his behalf.

55. Nick Fish told me to send over Bert's details to him in an email, and then he later let me know that Bert had been on the haemophilia Register. He sent me an application form and explained what documents I would need to send him, including Bert's medical records.

56. Unfortunately, I had very little luck obtaining Bert's medical records, especially as Westminster Hospital no longer existed by this point. However, Nick Fish supported me through the application process and I received a payment of £20,000, half of which I gave to Paul.

57. I really wish Bert and mum had received this financial assistance while they were still living, as mum died on the 13th of January 2008, long before we were made aware of this financial assistance existing. Having the financial assistance back then would have really benefited them, especially as £20,000 back then was worth far more than it is now. It would have vastly improved their quality of life.

58. I am shocked that no effort was made to notify my parents of the existence of these funds. I believe the trusts should have actually contacted the relevant people and offered them the money. It was just pure coincidence that I came to know about these funds, and I would have been far happier for the money to have gone to my parents, who really deserved it.

Section 8. Other Issues

59. I feel strongly that those who have been affected by the Infected Blood scandal should have been made aware of the financial assistance available to them. I found out about the Skipton Fund by complete chance, and others will not have been so lucky. If the funds are there to support those in need, that is what they should be doing. I hope that the Inquiry makes recommendations in relation to this issue, in the final report.

Statement of Truth

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

Signed GRO-C

Dated 18 Nov '21