

Witness Name: MARK FOX

Statement No: WITN6418001

Exhibits: 0

Dated: JUNE 2021

INFECTED BLOOD INQUIRY

FIRST WRITTEN STATEMENT OF MARK FOX

I, Mark Fox, will say as follows:-

Section 1. Introduction

1. My name is Mark Fox. I was born on GRO-C 1978 and I live at GRO-C
GRO-C County Durham GRO-C
2. I was infected with the Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) through contaminated blood products.
3. This witness statement has been prepared without the benefit of access to my medical records.

Section 2. How infected

4. I have Von Willebrand's Disease (VWD), diagnosed at birth. I was treated at the Royal Victoria Infirmary (RVI) under the care of Dr Peter Jones and Maureen Ferns, the Head Nurse there.

5. I was given a fair bit of FVIII treatment from when I started to walk (and fall) but particularly so in 1982 or 1983 [GRO-C]
[GRO-C] I went into foster care at aged 4. I will refer to my foster parents as my parents throughout this Statement.
6. My parents and I had no idea that I had been infected with HCV until in 1996 when I was 18 years old. We received regular letters from the Haemophilia Society with information and articles of interest about clinics and charity events. I remember my Dad calling me downstairs after reading an article about contaminated FVIII treatment administered in 1982/1983. I was due to attend for a routine appointment around that time in any event and I rang the hospital to ask about the article and was asked to come in.
7. At the appointment, Dr Jones and Nurse Maureen said they needed to tell me something and went on to say that I had been infected with a virus 'Hepatitis C'. I didn't know what 'Hepatitis C, was, and I thought Dr Jones was telling me that I had HIV/AIDS. Nurse Maureen was holding my hand and I remember thinking 'why is she holding my hand?' I was told by Dr Jones not to worry, that I was a strong, healthy, fit lad and that they had been checking my bloods and liver function levels along the way. I was told/reassured that I had not been infected with HIV/AIDS and that HCV was not a massive thing to be concerned about. I was over the moon when I left, believing I had had a lucky escape (from HIV/AIDS) albeit I was not impressed to be told 14-15 years after becoming infected and only after raising it as a query myself. It was all pretty much hushed up and swept under the carpet.
8. I wasn't given sufficient information or advice to help me understand and manage the infection. I was later given bits and pieces of information here and there. The information was drip fed to me over time. I was told that I was fit and strong and could carry on as I was. I had started going out drinking with my pals. I wasn't told to watch my drinking or warned about cirrhosis. I came from a fitness/body building background and took vitamin A

supplements too (without hepatotoxicity warning/advice). A couple of years later I felt unwell and my eyes turned yellow. I went to get a test and my liver levels were high.

9. I was never made aware that there was a known problem with FVIII concentrate. My parents didn't know. They became aware of the problem through an article they read. I was at the hospital several (6, 7 or 8) times a year from aged 4 and we were told nothing. I rang the hospital at aged 18 out of curiosity as to whether the article read by my parents involved me in any way. I was kept in the dark for all those years and later found out that many of the other children from the Centre I remember playing with had lost their lives to HIV and HCV.

Section 3. Other Infections

10. I was not infected with anything other than HCV.

Section 4. Consent

11. I was tested for infection and to check my liver function without my knowledge and consent and without the knowledge and consent of my parents. We were led to believe that my platelets were being checked to monitor my VWD when they took bloods from me at my appointments.

Section 5. Impact of the Infection

12. At aged 20 I had my first attempt at clearing HCV. I was asked if I wanted to go on a trial and I said 'yes'. Four weeks of treatment nearly killed me. I had left home for the very first time. I was young and stubborn and thought I knew

everything. I was in a flat on my own. I was told that I might experience flu like symptoms on the treatment, but I was pretty much bedridden and wasn't able to feed myself. With no food, I lost a stone in weight in that four-week period. My Dad came around to check on me and when he saw the state of me and my flat, he immediately rushed me to hospital. I was hospitalised for 4 or 5 days with IVs and sodium chloride. I was of course taken off the clearing treatment with immediate effect.

13. I quickly came to realise that fear and ignorance about HCV and the stigma of being infected is a huge issue. I was, at that time, working in a factory and had been dating a girl I had met there for a couple of years. She had read in a magazine that you couldn't share so much as a towel with someone with HCV. Unbeknown to me and without knowing she was worried, my girlfriend saw a nurse at the medical centre and told her that I had Hepatitis C. That nurse went berserk and told my girlfriend (amongst other things) to be very careful around me and that she should not on any account sleep with me. My girlfriend GRO-C was very frightened. We split up and, for a time, I had no idea as to what was going on with her.

14. As a result of an anonymous call to my employer expressing concern about my girlfriend's wellbeing, I was pulled into the office to be questioned and then suspended from work. I was then ostracised by my colleagues, some of whom rang me to ask if I had HIV/AIDS and/or whether I was an intravenous drug user. I wasn't in a fit physical or psychological state to be able to return to work at the factory. In short, I lost my job. I was left feeling dirty and alienated and I carried that horrible feeling around with me long after I left the factory. I am now very careful about whom I can confide in.

15. I told Dr Jones about the chain of events leading to me losing my job and he set the wheels in motion to discipline the nurse in question and she was eventually fired from her job. I was treated very differently at the dentist after my HCV diagnosis. Before the diagnosis I was treated with care. I was given a lollypop and a sticker, and it was a normal experience. Since the diagnosis,

I am always given the last appointment of the day to enable them to sterilize the tools overnight. They look at me sideways and they are dressed in full PPE from head to toe to see me. I get asked how I came to contract HCV. People always think I have used needles and they don't tend to believe that I have been infected through a drug administered to me by the NHS as treatment.

16. I had a second attempt at clearing the virus when I was 27 or 28 years old. I had met my wife then. She worked in a call centre and I worked in a gym. We were not yet married but had been together for a couple of years and I had her support and that of my parents, my brother and his girlfriend. The treatment was another trial, but I felt better prepared for it, having taken advice as to what I could and couldn't eat and the probable side effects. I had to self-inject myself with Interferon three times per week and was on the treatment for 8 weeks before ending up in hospital again. I remember my wife leaving for work at 1 pm and then nothing more until 11 pm that same night when I woke up at the RVI. I was suffering with what I thought to be a migraine when my wife left at 1 pm. My brother had found me unresponsive at 6 pm and it turned out that I had viral meningitis on the brain. I had lost three stone in 8 weeks (a lot of weight even for a heavy bodybuilder) and I was hospitalised for a week. I was told that I had to come off the treatment and that I could try again after I had got myself well.

17. The third attempt in 2011 finally worked but it has left me permanently physical and mentally damaged. I was given a 48-week course of a stronger dose of Interferon self-administered through weekly injections combined with Ribavirin. I was prescribed antidepressants to start taking around 8 weeks before the treatment because of the suicidal ideation the treatment is widely known to induce, and I did become very depressed on the treatment. I had been a father to two stepdaughters from when they were very young and had also just become a father to a little boy, born in GRO-C 2010. It was a huge step for me to take to even contemplate becoming a father. My life changed through being infected with HCV. When I began to realise the enormity of

being infected, I said to myself 'so now I can't have kids' and, for a long time, I completely dismissed it as a possibility because I couldn't risk passing on HCV (and/or VWD). My wife and I were told and assured that there was just a 2% chance of our child being born with HCV

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The uncertainty and stress of having to go through that is unbearable. I was never able to get a mortgage or take out life insurance, but I was providing for my family financially, working two jobs: at a factory during the week and as a bouncer/door supervisor in the evening at the weekend.

18. When I began the clearing treatment in January 2011, it changed me as a person. For the first four months of treatment I wasn't able to hold my son. That period of my son's life is forever lost to me. I was sleeping downstairs in our dining room area.

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She had to carry me upstairs to shower. It was horrendous. I had so many chest infections that I have been left with permanent scarring on the lungs and now use an inhaler all the time. I will never again be able to train as a body builder. My wife had to put up with my moods and ill temper as well as my inability to look after myself and support her. I didn't want to be with her because she didn't deserve what she had to endure, and I just wanted to push her away. We had no money and we took out an IVA. My wife had to do it all as I was helpless. I lay vomiting in front of them as they came from SCS to reclaim our sofa as everything was on finance. The TV went back to Currys and my car was repossessed. I wasn't fit to work to support my family. It was a massive thing to me. It really killed me inside.

19. I had no financial support. I had no income except for JSA. We relied on help for food and hand me downs from friends and family. I turned up for a DWP 'back to work' interview without hair and walking with a stick. I was having constant nose bleeds through stress. They took one look at me and asked

me whether I was on a chemo-based treatment and, then, why I was there, to which I could only reply 'you sent me a letter'. I was swiftly advised to apply for DLA. I had a lot of support at the RVI throughout that 48-week period. Karen, the Social Worker there helped me with the DLA forms, and they were signed off by Dr Kate Talks. My DLA claim was declined as I could, for example, walk 20 yards. We appealed the decision with help from a Human Rights Officer. After waiting for three months, the Judge asked me just two questions and the independent doctor just one before the Judge retired. I asked what was going on and was told that that had never happened before. The Judge then came back and walked over to me. He put his hand on my shoulder and shook my hand and said 'I'm so sorry at how you have been treated. I am going to write to the DWP to ensure that this never happens again. Your treatment has been awful.'

20. It felt strange when I was eventually given the 'all clear'. I felt neither happy nor sad. I couldn't react. After 48 weeks of intense support from social workers and doctors, you are left numb. To be left to go back into the world again with the 'all clear' without support to deal with the lasting effects is daunting. You never know if you have completely cleared it too as there is always a chance it could come back. I am not the same person and I have a different outlook on life. I have found too that you have to be economical with the truth. It is so easy for people to access misleading information through Google. There is a photo of me on Facebook without hair and people will draw their own erroneous conclusions (to include that I have HIV/AIDS or that I was a drug abuser) that it is easier to lie than tell them what happened to me.

21. In addition to the permanent scarring to my lungs, I suffer with bleeding gums and chronic, debilitating fatigue. I am unable to work and worry all the time about my wife and children. The impact on my mental health is profound. I suffer with depression and deep anxiety and have tried to commit suicide on two occasions the second time just after this Christmas (when the Police found me and intervened). I am no longer the man that my wife fell in love with and married. Our marriage has been under tremendous strain, to the

extent that we once even split up (I went to live with friends) for a short time. At aged 43, I am a grandfather to two lovely granddaughters, [GRO-C] and [GRO-C], aged 3 and 1 respectively. They mean everything to me, and I played a huge part in the first year of [GRO-C]'s life as she virtually lived with us during that time. [GRO-C] calls me 'Daddy-Granda'. The chronic fatigue I suffer with has had a massive effect on my energy levels and I am shattered most of the time. I am not always able for us to have our granddaughters overnight and as much as we would like. Our daughters understand what has happened to me but not the full extent of it. I do not want to burden them with the worry and that, in itself, has created conflict between us at times.

Section 6. Treatment/care/support

22. I was cared for and supported through 48 weeks of clearing treatment in 2011, but I have been left to deal with the lasting physical and psychological effects of the treatment without adequate support.

Section 7. Financial Assistance

23. I had my last dealings with the Skipton Fund at what I remember to be around the age of 24. I received a £20,000 ex gratia payment. I have, over the last 18 months or so, started to receive quarterly payments from EIBSS. I am reliant upon the money as I am using it to repay debt I have accrued during the time we were without income. We haven't had a holiday for over three years, but I just want to get out of the red and into the black. I have heard that the EIBSS payments will change at the end of July. It is stressful to me not knowing whether they will change for the better or not. It is important to me to know that the payments will continue indefinitely without reduction.

24. I would like some accountability and a simple 'sorry' to everyone infected and their families, to include those who have lost parents and children.

Anonymity, disclosure and redaction

25. I do not seek anonymity and I understand that this Statement will be published by the Infected Blood Inquiry.

Statement of Truth

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

Signed..... GRO-C

Dated.....09/07/2021.....