

Witness Name: Betty Palmer

Statement No.: WITN4221001

Exhibits: WITN4221002-006

Dated: 29-3-2022

## **INFECTED BLOOD INQUIRY**

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### **WRITTEN STATEMENT OF BETTY PALMER**

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I provide this statement in response to a request under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006 dated 24 November 2020.

I, Betty Palmer, will say as follows: -

#### **Section 1. Introduction**

1. My name is Betty Palmer. My date of birth is GRO-C 1960. My address is known to the Inquiry. I live on my own. I have five children. I am retired with ill health. I intend to speak about my infection with Hepatitis C (Hep C). In particular, the nature of my illness, how the illness affected me, the treatment received and the impact it had on me.

2. I can confirm that I am not legally represented and that the anonymity procedure has been explained to me and I do not wish to be anonymous. I am also aware that where I make criticism, a right of reply will be available.

## **Section 2. How Infected**

3. I believe I was infected with Hepatitis C during the pregnancy of my GRO-C in 1989. I was very huge during pregnancy even early on. People kept telling me that I looked as if I was about to drop. It worried me. I went to an antenatal clinic and spoke to a midwife. She contacted the consultant at St Michael's Hospital in Bristol who referred me for an emergency scan. It was revealed that the baby had foetal anaemia. The border around the amniotic sac should be millimetres thick but, in my case, it was centimetres thick. Further tests revealed that I had acquired parvovirus which induced GRO-C's anaemia. I was asked if I had any animals as the virus was associated with cats and dogs. I told them that I had rabbits. I was informed that GRO-C required an intrauterine intravascular blood transfusion.
4. A few days later, on 09 September 1989, a doctor from London performed the procedure. I was awake throughout. A tube was inserted into my stomach whereby 100mm of 75% blood was transfused into the umbilical vein whilst the baby was still in the womb. The procedure lasted about an hour. There was a standby crew in case I needed an emergency caesarean. They were very good. At the time, I felt really

special because of how they looked after me. A record of the transfusion is exhibited at Exhibit **WITN4221002**.

5. Although the operation was necessary, I was not provided with any warning of the risks associated with the blood that I was given. I was just thankful that [GRO-C] survived it.
6. About [GRO-C] weeks later, [GRO-C] was born on [GRO-C] 1989. It was a normal birth. I stayed in hospital for a couple of hours. I did not have any further blood transfusions. Life went on and I thought no more of it.
7. A few years ago, I can't be sure when but with the dates I am now aware of it must have been around the late Spring of 2015, I developed burst blood vessels on my legs which also became swollen. I spoke to my GP who referred me to the dermatologist at Bristol Royal Infirmary (BRI). I had multiple appointments with various dermatologists. They took blood. They then performed a biopsy on my leg. I subsequently received a call to inform me that I had an appointment at the Hepatitis clinic at the BRI. I wasn't told anything else, just to attend. It was a worrying few days waiting for that appointment as I kept it to myself, not wanting to upset my kids.
8. When I attended the appointment, I was seen by a gentleman who diagnosed me with Hepatitis C. He asked if I used IV drugs. I informed him that I did not but an ex-partner [GRO-C] had been a user. Our

relationship ended [GRO-C] I was angry and confused. I told the doctor that I didn't understand where I could have contracted the virus from. There were leaflets around and I was told that I was welcome to ask questions but the nature of the condition was not explained to me, nor was I offered any guidance on how it could be managed on a day to day basis. To this day, I still do not really understand what Hepatitis C is and how it can affect you. An appointment for treatment was arranged for the following week.

9. I was given a liver rebound test. The result was good. I didn't have any scarring or damage to my liver.

10. When I was diagnosed, I contacted my ex-partner who had also been diagnosed with HCV 4 years ago, around the year 2016. However, our relationship ended in [GRO-C]. I went on to conceive three further children since, who, to my knowledge do not have the virus. Therefore, to my mind, the only possible source is the transfusion I was given when I was pregnant with [GRO-C]

11. To be fully frank I have to admit that 10-15 years ago, I was a [GRO-C] user myself for a short period. However, I have never injected. [GRO-]

[GRO-C] It was a very difficult time of my life. I had just lost the closest person to me to cancer and I succumbed to temptation where I just wanted to forget everything.

12. I should also mention that I had a tattoo on my hip done in 1981. I had another on my back in the 1990s, both performed by professional

tattooists in parlour settings. I have never been medically treated abroad and I have not received any blood other than the transfusion that was provided to my son in the womb.

### **Section 3. Other Infections**

13. I am not aware that I have been infected with any infection other than Hep C. To my knowledge, I have not been tested for HIV.

### **Section 4. Consent**

14. I do not recall signing any consent forms with regards to the blood given to both [GRO-C] and I during the operation but I would have consented as it was necessary to my unborn [GRO-C] health.

15. I was not aware that I was being tested for Hepatitis C when blood was taken to determine the cause of my burst blood vessels.

16. I consented to the treatment I was given in relation to HCV.

17. The doctor who performed the Intrauterine intravascular blood transfusion requested whether my case could be recorded in The Lancet medical journal. The journal article is exhibited at Exhibit **WITN4221003**. I was the very first person to have this procedure. It didn't bother me that my circumstances were used in this way. Everyone has to learn.

## **Section 5. Impact**

18. Since the birth of [GRO-C], I have been constantly tired, always plagued by fatigue. I was looking after my dad who had Parkinson's for a long time and put a lot of it down to that. I also had four children to care for and bring up but it was more than that – a deep tiredness, where you just want to collapse. It remained with me. A few years before my diagnosis, I could have slept all day if allowed to. I cannot really recall any other side effects. Possibly being so busy I did not notice but there is nothing that comes readily to mind.

19. One of my kidneys is scarred. I have always had kidney problems but I am not aware if this this could be attributable to Hep C. Certainly none of my doctors has mentioned any connection but now I wonder.

20. I had chronic lung disease in my thirties for which I was given an inhaler and a ventilator. My lung capacity was measured as that of a 90-year-old. I smoked cigarettes but not heavily and to have a condition of this severity causes me think about whether this might have been caused, at least in part by my Hep C. The only other medical condition I have experienced was a mild heart attack on boxing day last year.

21. I was shocked, angry and devastated when I was diagnosed. I couldn't understand. In my limited knowledge, I thought people only got Hep C

from IV drug use. I have never taken drugs this way and so I was confused as to how I could have contracted it.

22. My immediate concern was whether this was something that I could have passed on to my children. How long had I been infected? Could any or indeed all of them have contracted it from me in the womb or during their upbringing? It was never suggested to me that they be tested by any of my doctors nor was any reassurance that they would be safe provided.

23. Within a few weeks of my diagnosis, I began treatment. I was given ribavirin tablets and a weekly Interferon injection. I had to take it on a Friday as I was warned that it can make people feel very unwell. The treatment lasted 12 months. I was regularly monitored. In the beginning it was every three weeks. Subsequently, I was seen once a month.

24. I was extremely nauseous during treatment. I was vomiting regularly and was given anti-sickness tablets. I was warned that I might have flu-like symptoms but I was pretty lucky as I didn't experience this. There were no other adverse symptoms that I recall. I feel I was lucky with the way I reacted to it.

25. I was given the all clear at the end of the treatment. I am due to see the doctor soon to check whether I remain negative for the virus. I have not had further liver scans since being given the all clear.

26. My children were all in their late twenties/early thirties at the time of my diagnosis and treatment. They were very concerned. Sometimes I wouldn't see them the weekend that I had the treatment as I just couldn't face anybody. I wanted to get on and deal with it on my own. They were worried that something might go wrong or that it may not work.

27. I have kept my Hep C very quiet because I am worried about the associated stigma. I have only told my close family and those that needed to know such as my ex-partner.

28. I was engaged at the time of diagnosis and treatment as my father's carer who was ill with Parkinson's.

29. I have not suffered any financial loss as I was not in paid employment during treatment and prior to that as mentioned, other than the fatigue, I was relatively unaffected by symptoms.

30. What surprises me is that nobody has ever conducted a look-back exercise to check the blood that [GRO-C] was given [GRO-C] has never been called back or tested for Hepatitis C. [GRO-C]  
[GRO-C] is aware that [GRO-C] had a blood transfusion when I was carrying [GRO-C]

31. With [GRO-C], I felt guilty about the possibility that [GRO-C] might have been infected. We are very close, probably partly to do with what happened.

[GRO-C]



[GRO-C] has never been an IV drug user and leads a healthy lifestyle. However, this is something I need to redouble my efforts on.

32. I trust my family doctor with my life, she looked after my dad throughout his illness. However, I am very reluctant to have any further treatment conducted by the NHS. [GRO-C]  
[GRO-C] I was very apprehensive when this was mentioned after everything that has happened to me.

#### **Section 6. Treatment/Care/Support**

33. My treatment was arranged quite quickly and I am happy with how it has been administered. However, I have never been offered any psychological support or counselling, neither at the point I was diagnosed nor during the medication period. I dealt with everything alone and having someone to talk it through with I am sure would have been beneficial.

#### **Section 7. Financial Assistance**

34. A consultant from the hepatology department at the Bristol Royal, Dr Fiona Gordon, pointed me in the direction of the Skipton fund. She oversaw my treatment. The Hospital were not sure where I could have contracted the virus from. They requested to see the video of the transfusion being given to [GRO-C].

35. I applied on 25 October 2015. (See Exhibit **WITN4221004**.) Prior to this, I telephoned them. I was provided with the application forms. I found the process very stressful but my daughter assisted me. They might have asked me if they could apply to access my medical records. I am aware that they have these on file.

36. On 1 April 2016, Dr Fiona Gordon wrote to Skipton urging the fund to carefully consider my application. (See Exhibit **WITN4221005**.) She supports the possibility that I contracted the virus from the transfusion given to [GRO-C] during my pregnancy. However, she also conceded that I experienced 'a brief period of IV drug misuse'. This is completely wrong. I believe that when I previously informed her that my ex-[GRO-C] was an IV drug user, she misconstrued this as meaning that I was an IV drug user. I believe this has inadvertently sabotaged my application.

37. There is a further error on the letter. I am aware now that she states in it that [GRO-C] has recently been tested for HCV and that [GRO-C] is "hepatitis-C antibody positive". This is incorrect. As mentioned, [GRO-C] has never been tested for the virus as far as I know. I am sure if [GRO-C] had undergone such a test [GRO-C] would have informed me, knowing how finding out about the infection impacted on me. I would like to add that I have since had the opportunity to discuss this in person with [GRO-C] and [GRO-C] assures me that [GRO-C] has never been tested for Hepatitis C.

38. I tried to challenge this as she provided me with a copy of the letter but she was on a holiday at the time. Despite repeated attempts to get in

touch with Dr Gordon to clarify this, I have not since been contacted for an explanation about this misinformation.

39. My application was rejected by Skipton on 27 April 2016 on the alleged basis that I was an IV drug user, which was 'considered a far greater risk for transmission of the virus than treatment with NHS blood prior to September 1991.' I couldn't understand this as I have never taken drugs this way. This is exhibited at Exhibit **WITN4221006**.

40. I was hurt and angry when I was rejected. I felt that the implication was that I was a liar and a drug user. It was like a stab in the back. Had Dr Gordon not written what she had, I believe that my application may have been successful. I considered appealing but I didn't know who to go to or how. I was on my own with five children, approaching the end of treatment and was downhearted with it all. I couldn't afford a solicitor so I just accepted their decision.

41. After my Skipton rejection, I would be very reluctant to apply to further financial schemes. My confidence was knocked by the refusal and I am not the most robust of people. I feel that I was cheated in a way by the system. How can you fight it in my position? I trusted doctors all those years back and accepted what was, an experimental treatment for the sake of my GRO-C wellbeing. Despite all that has happened I would do it again in a heartbeat.

### Statement of Truth

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

Signed

GRO-C

Dated

29-3-2022

### Table of Exhibits

Notes/Description	Date	Exhibit number
Record of intrauterine intravascular blood transfusion	5-9 September 1989	WITN4221002
The Lancet, 'Intrauterine blood transfusion for non-immune hydrops fetalis due to parvovirus B19 infection by Peter Soothill	14 July 1990	WITN4221003
Application to Skipton Fund	25 October 2015	WITN4221004
Letter from Dr Fiona Gordon, Bristol Royal Infirmary to Nick Fish, Skipton Fund	1 April 2016	WITN4221005
Letter from Nicholas Fish Re: Skipton Fund Application Rejection	27 April 2016	WITN4221006