

Witness Name: Stella Marija Saliba

Statement No: WITN7382001

Exhibits: **WITN7382002 - 003**

Dated: 12 April 2023

## **INFECTED BLOOD INQUIRY**

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### **WRITTEN STATEMENT OF STELLA MARIJA SALIBA**

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I provide this statement in response to a request under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006 dated 10 November 2022.

I, Stella Marija Saliba, will say as follows: -

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

1. My name is Stella Marija Saliba. My date of birth is GRO-C 1961.  
I live in Wallington; Surrey and my full address is known to the Inquiry.
2. I used to work in a high-powered job organising large scale conferences and travelled around the world for my work. I have since retired from working in high pressure environments and now work for a local company, in Reception doing administrative work.
3. I have two brothers, both of whom are older than me.
4. I intend to speak about my mother Jean Florence Saliba, born on GRO-C  
GRO-C 1927 and her infection with Hepatitis C ("HCV"). In particular, I

intend to speak about the nature of her illness, how it affected her, the treatment she received and its impact on her and our family's life together.

5. I confirm that I am not legally represented, and I am happy for the Inquiry Team to assist with my statement. I do not wish to provide my account anonymously.
6. The Inquiry Investigator has explained the Inquiry's statement of approach and 'Right to Reply' procedure. I understand that if I am critical of a medical professional or organisation, they will have the right to reply to that criticism.
7. I wish to acknowledge that as time passes, memories can fade. I have been able to provide approximate timeframes for matters based on life events. However, these timeframes should be accepted as 'near to' rather than precise dates.
8. A few years after my mother died, I paid to see her medical records and, from looking through the two thick folders, found out additional information which we were never aware of before my mum died.

## **Section 2. How Affected**

9. Sometime in the late 1970s or early 1980s, my mother had to have her first hip operation. She was in her early to mid-50s and the procedure was due to be carried out at the Wilson Hospital in Mitcham.
10. In those days, the doctors did not like carrying out hip replacements on someone as young as my mum, because they were aware that the joints would wear out and the person would have to have the new ones replaced after approximately 10 years.

11. My mother had a history of thrombosis from an early age and after the operation, my mum suspected that she may have suffered a thrombosis and informed the nurse on the ward at the time. It was at night and the nurse advised her to wait until the day staff arrived. My mum propped herself up in bed until the day staff arrived and was rushed to St Helier Hospital, Carshalton and a thrombosis was confirmed.
12. Within six months to a year after her first hip replacement, my mother had a second hip replacement on her other leg, fell and had to have a third hip operation on the first side. During these multiple operations, my mum received a blood transfusion on at least one occasion.
13. Life carried on as normal, and sometime in the late 1980s to early 1990s, my mum had to have further hip replacements because the old ones had worn out.
14. By the early 2000s, my mum had begun to experience symptoms of HCV, but no one had realised this at the time. In August 2000, my mum complained of itchy skin on her arms, legs and abdomen, which was severe enough that constant scratching was causing bleeding. She visited her GP, who prescribed her antihistamines, but this did not work.
15. In December 2000, my mum had another hip revision operation carried out by Mr Field at St Helier Hospital.
16. On 13 January 2001, my mother was very unwell and was admitted into the hospital with swelling from her legs to abdomen, which caused her breathing difficulties. The doctors put the swelling down to water retention following her recent surgery, and she was sent home with diuretic medication.
17. The doctors knew my mother had ascites but did not communicate this to us. While looking at my mum's records about two and a half years after her death, I realised that she had been discharged with a note mentioning a diagnosis of ascites.

18. From looking up this diagnosis on the internet, I have since realised that it explained many of the symptoms my mother had been experiencing at the time, from itchy skin to chronic fatigue.
19. My mother was only diagnosed with HCV a few days before she died. I don't know if she was ever aware, but my brothers and I were told at 7pm on 20 November 2003.
20. On 31 October 2003, my mother had her sixth and last hip revision operation carried out by Mr Field, who advised at the pre-op appointment that there were no concerns other than managing my mother's warfarin.
21. The doctors should have informed us that there was a much higher risk of complications following the surgery due to other health issues, and my mum should never have had that surgery. I believe that her final hip operation kick started her decline and led to her death.
22. Initially, after the operation, my mum seemed to be doing well. I visited her at the hospital, and she did not think she was dying. Less than a week after the operation, she was swelling up again and complained of being unable to wear her clothes properly because the buttons on her top wouldn't close. I pleaded with the doctors not to send her home until someone had reviewed her swollen stomach, but nobody took us seriously and insisted she would be discharged Sunday 16 November 2003.
23. On 14 November 2003, I was working at my office at Epsom Downs when I received a phone call from one of the nurses, who told me not to worry and put my mother on the phone. She sounded petrified; all she could say was, "please come". When I arrived at the hospital, my eldest brother was already there holding her hand.
24. She was vomiting blood as fast as they were transfusing her with more blood. She was still in the hospital recovering from the hip operation. The doctor said that she had lost every pint of blood in her body.

25. Watching all these nurses running back and forth with all this blood was horrendous. I felt like I wanted to pass out. I kept pleading with the ward doctor to do something; he said she was due to go to the Endoscopy Department but they could not take her yet. I thought, surely this must be a priority; she's vomiting all this blood. I kept asking him to call the department again, which he did several times but we had to wait.
26. By the time they finally took my mother to Endoscopy, they had trouble seeing down her oesophagus because there was too much blood. Another doctor said that, given her age, they were not going to do anything. He wrote her off simply because of her age. My middle brother challenged this and said he didn't care even if she only had a 5% chance, they should at least give her that chance.
27. My mother was in an induced coma and remained in the ICU for about a week after this. Throughout this time, I slept on a sofa in the hospital visitors' room and sat by my mother's bedside during visiting hours from 7 am to 9 pm. On 15 November 2003, she had to have a tracheotomy and was put on a breathing machine.
28. On 25 November 2003, they moved my mum to the High Dependency Unit, and at first, she was quite confused after waking up from her coma.
29. My mum was quite astute, and I believe this was when she overheard the doctors talking about her diagnosis with a virus. When I visited her, she tried to communicate what she had heard to me. She drew a diagram depicting a hip/leg and mentioned a virus, but I did not understand what she was trying to tell me then.
30. Afterwards, she begged me to take her home and thought that the reason I wouldn't do so was because I wanted her bedroom in the house. I had always looked after my mum, and it broke my heart that I could not take her home.

31. I cannot fault the care my mum received while she was in ICU. They had one nurse for each patient, and the nurse who looked after my mum was lovely.
32. However, the staff in the High Dependency Unit did not appear to have the same level of care. At times they would sit in a group with their backs to you and chat while taking a tea break and on one such occasion I had to draw their attention to a female patient with blood on her bed.
33. Around 7 pm on Saturday, 29 November 2003, the doctors informed my brothers and I that my mum had HCV, and there was no hope for recovery. The fluid build-up was crushing the air out of her lungs, and the whites of her eyes had gone yellow. The doctors explained that all we could do was be there with her.
34. I do not recall if they explained to us what HCV was. They may have tried to, but the important thing they tried to communicate to us at the time was that our mum was going to die and we had to come to terms with it.
35. I had not given up on my mum and was still pleading with the doctors to re-examine her notes. It was now Monday, and at 6 am, they took me away from my mother's bedside where I had spent the night, to the visitors waiting room to speak to me. As I returned to my mum's bedside, her monitor dropped to zero and she was gone.
36. My mum died in the High Dependency Unit at St Helier Hospital on 1 December 2003.
37. I still feel guilty and very upset that I was not there with her in the last half hour of her life, even though I had been with her the whole time.
38. I believe there were several opportunities to have tested my mum for HCV before we were informed just days before she died in 2003, especially given the diagnosis of ascites in 2001.

39. My mother gave birth to a stillborn boy at St Helier Hospital in the late 1960s and it is possible that she could have had a blood transfusion after this delivery.
40. My mum had no tattoos and had never led a lifestyle that could have put her at risk of contracting HCV. She never received any medical procedures abroad and had never been an intravenous drug user.

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

41. I am not aware of any other infection my mum may have received other than HCV due to being given infected blood. I do not know if my mother would have been tested for HIV and HCV before we were told that she had HCV.

### **Section 4. Consent**

42. No one informed us that my mum was being tested for HCV before we discovered she had contracted HCV on 29 November 2001.
43. I am not aware of whether my mum signed any consent forms outside of the standard forms required for the operation before her hip surgeries in the 1980s. I do not think anyone suggested that there may be risks associated with receiving a blood transfusion.

### **Section 5. Impact**

44. My mum was a lovely woman. She was very kind and welcoming to all and was always laughing. You could not guess to look at her, what she had been through in life.
45. My mum was born in 1927 to a single mother at a time when it was frowned upon to be born out of wedlock and my grandmother agreed to my mum being put into care at a convent, from birth until 7 years old.

The convent would not keep children after 7 years of age and my grandmother paid a lady in Carshalton to take her in.

46. When my mum was 14, my grandmother brought her back to London from the countryside due to the ongoing war. It was a tough and unhappy childhood for my mum.

47. In her early twenties, my mum left home and worked abroad as a nanny for the Diplomatic Corps in Egypt, Cyprus and Malta. In Malta, my mum met my dad and they got married. My mother had a miscarriage in Malta and they returned to live in England, eventually buying a house in Carshalton. GRO-C

GRO-C It was difficult because my mother was catholic and divorce was frowned upon. The priest told her she would be unable to receive communion after a divorce.

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GRO-C Eventually my mother separated from my father and got divorced.

49. After my mum's hip replacement in the 1980s, she struggled to move around due to pain in her hips. She was also frequently fatigued and complained about itchy skin for around 10 to 20 years.

50. In hindsight I realise my mother lacked her usual zest for life in the last few years.

51. My mother liked gardening and we enjoyed doing this together. She also enjoyed doing needlework. Due to the itchy skin, she was on antihistamines such as Piriton, and I used to think that may have contributed to her sleeping a lot.



52. I can also remember on my last birthday before she died, we wanted to go out to dinner, but my mum complained of not feeling well enough. It was evident that she was struggling, but we did not know why.
53. Around this time, she was petrified because she thought she had developed a growth in her groin area. It looked like a boil so I squeezed it and it burst and puss came out. I imagine that symptoms such as these, coupled with the intense itchy skin, must have had a psychological impact on my mum.
54. Her first bout of ascites began in 2001 following the hip revision operation carried out by Mr Field.
55. Over the years, I visited several doctors and hospitals, attempting to get to the bottom of my mum's itchy skin.
56. In 2000, due to my job, I had private medical insurance, so I took my mum to Parkside Hospital in Wimbledon. Even with the insurance, I paid £90 for the consultation, but in the end, they did not come to any conclusion.
57. In June 2000, my mum and I visited Shirley Oaks Hospital in Croydon and on that occasion, I paid £85 for the consultation. I was taking my mum around to see different doctors, because I was not getting any answers.
58. After my mum died in December 2003, I wrote to every hospital we had visited for a consultation to inform them that my mum had contracted HCV through a blood transfusion. I did this to raise awareness of how HCV can manifest in terms of symptoms, because they had all missed the opportunity to properly diagnose my mum or point us in a direction that could have eventually led to the diagnosis.
59. I thought the hospitals would at least write back to acknowledge my letters but none did.

60. When my mum died, it was devastating for my brothers and me. We buried her within a week, on 9 December 2003. I do not recall experiencing any issues with the undertakers. I was in a daze for most of that period.
61. I remember my middle brother driving me around to make funeral arrangements, and friends giving me gin and tonic to be able to hold myself together to read her favourite poem at the funeral.
62. I have since heard that people were put in bags after they died of HCV, but I don't know if this is true or if my mother was.
63. There was some stigma in another respect because the doctors kept asking me if my mum was a drinker. They kept on about it, asking if I was sure because you can't always know when someone is an alcoholic.
64. This was when my mum was vomiting blood. They kept insisting that my mum must be a drinker. I believe it was because they knew she had ascites related to liver disease. The focus on alcoholism made me feel terrible because she was a good person, and it felt as though they were trying to manipulate me into thinking that she was an alcoholic, as though I did not know my own mother.
65. It was as though they were unwilling to consider any other conclusion for my mother's symptoms, just the first, most obvious ones.
66. My mum developed arthritis in her 50's and I think this may have been due to the menopause. I never thought about why she developed arthritis until I began menopause and started developing arthritis myself.
67. I know I cannot develop HCV from a blood transfusion, but I will never get a hip replacement operation. Once, I had to attend Epsom Hospital for a procedure, but I did not want to be there at all. I was in and out of the hospital within a day. Thankfully my procedure was benign.

68. My mum was my life. She was my best friend, my mum, my everything. I just wanted to look after her. Over the years, my mum had gradually become disabled, but I was happy to care for her.
69. I ended up quitting my high-powered job due to depression and anxiety issues. I was overreacting to things at work that I would normally handle fine, and it was evident that I was not coping. I did not want to work in London so when my bosses sold the company, I did not see any point in continuing to work in high-pressure environments.
70. My mum died when I was 40 years old, and it took ten years of grieving and medicating using antidepressants, Temazepam, Diazepam and alcohol to get through the dark period. I needed everything to keep me going. I feel like I lost at least ten years of my life. I only started coming out of it after I turned 50.
71. I cannot remember how long I was on medications for. I wouldn't want to come home after work because I could not bear to go back to the house where I had lived with my mum. I was walking around like a zombie, and on several occasions my eldest brother would have to ring me to return home.
72. My mum died just before Christmas, so the holiday periods continue to be difficult for me. The first Christmas after my mum died, I went to the GP surgery to pick up some prescription medication, and I took my dogs with me. For a second, I looked at the medication and thought to myself that I could just end it all with the pills.
73. The lady at the GP surgery had been very nice, and she asked about my wellbeing as well as the dogs, and just that moment made me think I could carry on. The fact that someone knew I was alive, and had thought to care about my dogs.
74. Despite how bad things got I still managed to make it to work every morning. However, I feel like it has aged me. I cried a lot for many years.

75. We are a close-knit family, especially because of what we went through with our dad. My brothers were devastated too at the loss of our mother and we all struggled to deal with the trauma of her death and the events leading to it.

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so I had to deal with everything and figure out what happened and why.

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77. I used to work in London, but found a job closer to home in Sutton primarily to look after my mum and protect her from my dad as he had threatened her that he was outside the house and had a gun.

78. After all my mum went through with my dad, she was never bitter. It hurts all the more when I think of how she died because she deserved better.

79. If my brothers and I had been aware that she had ascites since 2001, perhaps we would have looked into it more, and she wouldn't have had to die gasping for breath. I don't know if it would have been possible to fight for the hospital to consider draining the fluid, but by the time we found out, my mum was already dead.

80. On various occasions, I asked the doctors and nurses at St Helier to review my mum's medical history to find out what was wrong, but no one ever listened.

81. One of the doctors at St Helier was infantilising towards my mum as a patient and to us her family members. There was an occasion when we attended A&E at St Helier and were kept waiting with my mum lying down on a cold gurney until after midnight.

82. My mum was 73 years old at this point and was recovering from her fifth hip operation, and as we had been told we would have to wait until the consultant did his morning rounds, I decided to take her home briefly and bring her back early morning.
83. I snuck my mum out in a wheelchair, but we returned to A&E in the morning. The consultant scolded me and smacked me on the hand, exclaiming, "you've been naughty, you're lucky we let you come back." He treated me like I was a child.
84. My mum ended up being admitted into the hospital on this occasion. Due to the diuretics she was on, she had lost three stone in fluid.
85. Two years following my mum's death, I still could not understand how my mum's health had deteriorated so rapidly and how we never found out that she had HCV until the very end.
86. I contacted St Helier and requested to see her medical records from the time. I paid a fee and was asked to come in to view the records at St Helier Hospital. They gave me two very thick folders to look through. I was still quite traumatised by mum's death at the time, and it was horrible going through the folders and seeing how much my mum went through before she died.
87. It was during this review of the records that I noticed in a clear plastic wallet two pages facing inward. When I brought it out, the document was following my mum's discharge after her operation in 2001, stating that my mum had liver failure related ascites.
88. We lived in Wallington for about five or six years before my mother died, and we had always been at the same surgery, Shotfield Medical Practice in Wallington.
89. I must have contacted the PALs network and received a letter from St Helier Hospital Clinical Records on 12 July 2006, they said I could come

in to look through the files. I did not know what I was looking for, but I felt sure there was information I was missing.

90. Suppose I had just flipped through the files, I wouldn't have noticed. Every page was hole punched, and I could read documents without taking them out of the wallet. This was the only one not immediately obvious.
91. It came across like it was hidden, and I thought it may have been deliberate. I questioned someone at the hospital, and she responded that this had always been the way my mum's files were organised.
92. I did not even know what ascites was at the time, but I felt confident that this must be what I was looking for as it was the only thing not out in the open. I am glad I did go because my findings made me feel justified about my feelings throughout.
93. I even worried about whether the hospital would send me a copy of the document if I walked away, but it was fine. The admin staff would probably not have been a part of any cover-up, and they were the ones that organised for a copy to be sent to me.
94. The document did not refer to cirrhosis or liver cancer, only to liver related ascites.
95. My mum's death has had a profound impact on my life. My childhood meant that I did not want to get married or have children, so my mum and siblings are everything to me.
96. I couldn't sleep in the immediate aftermath of her death because I was trying to fit the pieces together. I kept replaying her last days over and over in my head.
97. If my mum had died normally, it would not have affected me as much as it did. It was because her death was so traumatic it left a lasting impact that may never go away.

98. My older brother and I watched as her eyes bulged as she gasped for breath in those last hours. After they confirmed that she was dead I kept uttering the words "you promised you wouldn't leave me", and "I can't leave her on her own".
99. No one advised us to get tested for HCV, but my brothers and I went to our GP to get tested. My GP did not want to do it, but I insisted. I had been caring for my mum for many years and thought there could be a risk that I could have contracted HCV.
100. I was not well informed about how HCV is passed on, so I thought it was better to get tested. Luckily all our results came back negative.
101. My mum and I were very close, and if she had been informed at any stage that she had been diagnosed with HCV, she would have told me right away. She was worried about her health and knew something was wrong all those years but she did not know what the problem was.
102. Knowing my mum, she must have been scared and looking to me to figure out what was wrong. It is why I tried for many years to figure out what was causing the itchy skin.
103. I contacted the Hepatitis C Trust, and they have been really helpful. I learned so much more about HCV through the Trust, and in 2016, I participated in an awareness raising campaign with the Trust. It was a radio program, and I came down to Westminster to tell my mum's story.
104. In 2004 a year after my mum's death, I wrote to St Helier seeking answers but all I received from the consultant, Dr [GRO-D] was that he had nothing to do with my mum's case. In 2007, I wrote to my local MP Tom Brake, and had the opportunity to go to the House of Commons.

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

105. As explained above, I think the doctors and nurses at St Helier failed to treat my mother properly, from looking at her as old to trying to paint her as an alcoholic. As a result, they became an obstacle to my mum obtaining adequate and appropriate treatment, care and support.
106. No one ever informed us about the availability of counselling or psychological support services. In any case, my mum was unaware of her HCV diagnosis until a couple of days before she died.
107. I have since had counselling through my GP. I even did group therapy, and it was around the time when I went to view my mother's medical records.

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

108. I cannot recall how I found out about the Skipton Fund, I may have heard about it on the news, or someone must have mentioned it, and I carried out further research afterwards.
109. In April 2015, I submitted an application for support to the Fund, and it was reasonably straightforward. Our application was approved, and we received the stage one payment of £20,000 as a lump sum. In 2016, we received a further stage two payment of £50,000.
110. My brothers and I shared the money, even though I felt guilty that we benefited from financial support when my mother died.

### **Section 8. Other Issues**

111. It has been twenty years since my mum died. I want her to be counted among the people the contaminated blood scandal has impacted. It is not the fact that it happened that makes me angry, it is the fact that they covered it up.



112. It is difficult for me to understand how many doctors have very little knowledge regarding HCV and its symptoms. I saw various doctors within the NHS and privately, and not one of them picked up on the possibility that my mum could have HCV.
113. I compiled a chronology of events shortly after my mother died which I provide to the Inquiry as Exhibit **WITN7382002** along with a photograph of my mother, myself and friends. **WITN7382003**.
114. Following my mother's death and on reviewing her medical records, my eldest brother and I requested a meeting at St Helier Hospital. I believe we met with a lady from Admin and an impartial consultant. We requested this meeting purely to find a way to help and safeguard future patients having an operation, who may be unaware that they had contracted HCV. The solution we agreed was to have a simple form for patients to complete before an operation, to ascertain whether they had had any blood transfusions during the relevant period, and if so, whether they were presenting with potential HCV symptoms. I believe this was going to be implemented.

### **Statement of Truth**

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

Signed                     GRO-C                    

Dated 12/4/23