

Witness Name: Elizabeth Walsh

Statement No: WITN4897001

Exhibits: 0

Dated:

INFECTED BLOOD INQUIRY

WRITTEN STATEMENT OF ELIZABETH WALSH

I provide this statement in response to a request under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006 dated 16 February 2021.

I, Elizabeth Walsh, will say as follows: -

Section 1. Introduction

1. My name is Elizabeth Walsh and my date of birth is GRO-C 1954. I live in Northumberland and my address is known to the Inquiry. I'm married and I have three children who are now adults.
2. I work as a Midday Senior Supervisor at Wooler Schools and have done for about 20 years. I'm in charge of lunchtime staff and also look after the children.

Section 2. How Infected

3. On 17 November 1978 I had a major road traffic accident. I was 24 years old at the time. I was very severely injured. The artery in my left leg was severed and I had a bad facial injury.
4. I was on my way to Tunbridge Wells, driving a very old land rover. I skidded and hit a lorry full of sand, pretty much head on. As far as I can remember, I went through the windscreen and back again. The lorry driver sprained his ankle. He later came to see me in hospital.
5. I had been driving 22 mph and the lorry driver was driving 18 mph on collision, making this a 40 mph collision. The police figured this out later.
6. Somehow they managed to keep me conscious while they were cutting me out of the car. It took 3 or 4 hours and I was losing blood for all of that time.
7. In hospital I was given 12 pints of blood. This was in Pembury Hospital. Doctors from East Grinstead came out to sew my face together. Most of the left side of my face was caved in. You can't see it now after about 40 or so years. I lost my bottom teeth and lost sight in my left eye. They put a frame on my face which was screwed in to hold it together so that the bones could reframe.
8. My left leg was broken in three places. The step brake went in just below my knee and severed my artery. They were going to amputate it. So the doctor said we might as well try an artery graft. He had never done one before but he tried it and it worked. His name was Mr Boffard, he was lovely. I'll never forget him.
9. I don't think anything held my leg together apart from ligaments and tendons. I did the exercises though and, if I say so myself, I think I made a remarkable recovery.

10. I was in Pembury Hospital for 6 weeks. They were absolutely wonderful. I was released just before Christmas with both legs in full plasters. It took months to get my right leg strengthened, to be able to walk.
11. I do recall the first time I looked in the mirror. I think I made a decision there and then, that I could hide away from the world for the rest of my life, or I could go out there and face it. And that's what I did.
12. I've always suffered with my legs, they were never the same again. But I did get away pretty well. I recovered from the accident and lived my life to the fullest I could. I had three children and a wonderful husband. I got back to horse-riding and led a very active life at that point.
13. But about 15 or 20 years ago, I started to feel generally unwell. I felt tired constantly. I just knew something wasn't right. I booked an appointment at the doctors. For me to go to the doctors, I had to be very unwell because I do not take going to the doctors lightly. They did blood tests and I was diagnosed with Hepatitis C (HCV).
14. I was tender around the liver area. I remember when I was at the hospital for the tests and they were pressing around that area and it felt painful.
15. I went to my GP originally. I can't remember if they did the blood tests. I was referred to the Liver Unit at the Freeman Hospital in Newcastle. That's when I was put under the care of Professor Bassendine. I can't remember much. Looking back, I think I was a lot more unwell than I realised.
16. Professor Bassendine was a very forthright lady and I can imagine she just came out and told me. GRO-C At home, we started using different towels etc. I think Professor Bassendine gave me that advice. She was a lovely woman and I got on really well with her.

Section 3. Other Infections

17. They mentioned Hepatitis B as well. I think that was the first one they came up with. I can't remember much about it.

18. I don't think they knew much about Hepatitis C when I first got it. It was always referred to as "Hep C" though, not "non A non B."

Section 4. Consent

19. I wasn't in a position to consent to the blood transfusion, it was just a life or death situation. There was no time to discuss risks.

20. I was never tested on without my consent, not that I'm aware of.

21. At the beginning, I was asked to participate in some test program which was investigating HCV. It was with Nottingham University. They asked me if I would give them some extra blood samples and I agreed. Some were frozen and some were used. I drank some horrible milky ice cream stuff so they could do the research.

22. I always agreed to it because if they've cured me then I'm happy to do anything to help with the research. I signed everything to say I agree to it. I go in for my bloods now, and on the odd occasion an HCV nurse comes in and they take a few extra files for themselves.

Section 5. Impact

Physical and Mental impact of Hepatitis C

23. I was told I've got cirrhosis of the liver. There is lots of scarring.

24. I felt unwell and tired all the time. But I kept going. You don't have much of a choice with three kids, two dogs, two cats and a couple of horses. I did a lot with school as well.

25. I was so busy trying to teach myself to walk again without crutches that depression didn't get a chance. I was determined. I remember shouting upstairs one night, "Come and have a look at what I can do!"

26. I just get on with things. I always come out the other side. I'm not saying I don't get depressed about things, because I do. Thankfully I enjoy reading.

Physical and mental impact of the treatment

27. I was put on a course of Ribavirin tablets and Interferon injections. I think it was a 3-month course.

28. Very shortly after I started the treatment, I started to get severe pains in my left hip. This was to the point that I really couldn't walk. My husband took me to osteopaths, acupuncturists, and all sorts. We tried everything. I was getting worse and worse.

29. The treatment had other side effects too. I was so ill I didn't know what was going on. I believe my husband called the doctors and said, "I think my wife's dying, please do something about it."

30. He took me to the doctor's surgery and that's when an ambulance came. I was taken to the General Hospital in Newcastle and I was put in isolation as they didn't know what was wrong initially. I was told I had a Psoas abscess on my left hip. I was admitted for 6 weeks in the infectious diseases ward.

31. The ball in my hip totally disintegrated. It left me with my leg 3 or 4 inches shorter. The doctors said it was because of a reaction to the Interferon. I don't think they thought I would walk again. But I did, I can! I limp and I do take a lot of pain killers.
32. I attended the musculoskeletal clinic for many years and the doctor has said the femur has fused to my hip bone but it can't be operated on.
33. I believe they told me that the Interferon had reduced my immune system and then this psoas abscess had done its deed. They didn't know what was wrong with me when I first got to hospital. They drained my stomach at some point as well as I had ascetis, they took off about 5 litres of fluid. I really did nearly die that time. I thought I was in hospital for a week but it was actually 6 weeks.
34. The doctor eventually showed me what had happened inside. I got X-Rays every time I went in. He showed me that the long bone in my leg had pierced itself into my pelvis and the bone had knitted itself together. He said, "You have performed the hip replacement yourself, but without the movement." He said we were better off leaving it well alone and that I could call him if there were any issues.
35. I still work but I have to get around without crutches. I enjoy my work and it keeps me going.
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36. I can't horseride anymore. That really is the only thing that breaks my heart.
37. I never completed the course of interferon. I stopped the treatment at that point. They did keep monitoring my liver. I don't think it got any worse. I had a liver biopsy at one point. Every 6 months they get me in for ultrasounds and blood tests, at the Freeman Hospital.

Financial Impact

38. The HCV diagnosis didn't affect my work. The headmaster at the school was really good about it. He decided that I could still come in to work and just be careful not to cut myself.

39. Later on, when my hip disintegrated, I was off work for months, until I could actually walk. Then I went in and I used crutches, until someone from the council came in and saw me and said I was a health hazard. So I ditched the crutches and I hobbled.

40. There wasn't a financial effect of being in hospital as I still got full pay.

Stigma

41. The headmaster at the school was good about it. But other staff didn't know about it. It wasn't openly discussed.

42. I did not spread the word around. I do talk a lot more freely now that its cured.

Section 6. Treatment/Care/Support

43. I have no complaints about the hospitals. They got me through to the other side. I'll never forget the registrar who saved my leg, Mr Boffard. He wasn't much older than me at the time. He's famous now.

44. The liver specialist was very good with information too.

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45. My HCV has been cleared now. About 5 years ago I got given this wonder drug called Harvoni and it worked. The doctors were wonderful. They explained to me

how difficult it was to get hold of. They had to go in front of the medical board to get it. My guess is that because of the catastrophe I was put through with the Interferon, I was made top of the list.

46. I was on it for 3 months and it cleared the HCV. There weren't any side effects at all. My leg didn't "fall off" this time.

47. This was all in the Liver Department at the Freeman Hospital. They are still monitoring me. I go down and do my bloods and I get an ultrasound every 6 months. They do keep a good eye on me.

Section 7. Financial Assistance

48. In about 2005, Professor Bassendine told me about the Skipton Fund. She filled out my application form and sent it off.

49. But I got a response saying that no medical records were found to prove the transfusion. There was nothing at Pembury Hospital, and nothing at East Grinstead Hospital.

50. I haven't had any other transfusions. I haven't got any tattoos. I pierced my ears myself, at home.

51. In my Skipton application, Professor Bassendine mentioned that I had tried drugs, but Skipton didn't mention that in my refusal letter. I tried drugs in 1976. My partner at the time was a registered drug addict. He was on methadone, which he injected. I used to go to the chemist to pick it up for him. I tried it about 3 times, with a sterile needle straight from the chemist. I stopped after that.

52. I wasn't really bothered about not being able to get money from Skipton. I've never really looked for financial gain to be honest. I've always just seen it as something that happened in my life and got on with it.

53. Social services did install some grab rails around the house at one point.

54. I was not aware of EIBSS but the investigators have informed me.

Section 8. Other Issues

55. I'm not the sort of person to be thinking, "Why did this happen to me?" I had a car crash, I got HCV. That's it.

Statement of Truth

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

Signed GRO-C

Dated 25/4/2022

