

Witness Name: Caroline Higgins

Statement No: WITN2886001

Exhibits: WITN2886002

Dated: October 2019

## INFECTED BLOOD INQUIRY

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### FIRST WRITTEN STATEMENT OF CAROLINE HIGGINS

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I, Caroline Higgins, will say as follows:-

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

1. My name is Caroline Higgins. My date of birth is GRO-C 1969. I live alone at GRO-C GRO-C. I have a son, Joseph, who is 21 years old and I currently work as a jeweller.
2. My father, Joseph Higgins, was born on GRO-C 1947 and died on 16<sup>th</sup> August 2014 after being infected with Hepatitis C following a blood transfusion.
3. This witness statement has been prepared without the benefit of access to my late father's medical records. If and in so far as I have been provided with limited records the relevant entries are set out in the medical chronology at the end of this statement.

#### **Section 2. How Affected**

4. Growing up I lived with my parents along with my five siblings. GRO-C  
GRO-C  
GRO-C Life therefore was very difficult for us as a family and although my father wouldn't drink every day, he would binge drink when he would struggle with everything that was going on around him.

5. In or around 1976, my father suffered a burst ulcer and was rushed to Monklands Hospital in Airdrie, where he was given a blood transfusion. As I was only around 7 years old at the time, I have been told by family that my father came out in a rash soon after receiving the blood and a flurry of doctors rushed to attend to him.
6. Following this treatment, my father began to suffer from nerves and anxiety and was prescribed tablets, Ativan, which later proved to have harmful effects on the body and so were taken off the market. My father's drinking became a severe problem once his general health declined. As such he made the decision to give up alcohol altogether at the age of 39. I know from 1994 onwards he was taking Lorazepam on a regular basis.
7. Towards the end of 1997, my father consulted a cardiologist, Dr [GRO-D], at the Gartnavel General Hospital in Glasgow who nonchalantly asked 'did you know that you have Hepatitis C?' This was the first time my father had even heard of the virus. She then only went on to say that my father wouldn't be able to kiss his grandchildren and that he would have to be very careful managing his daily life. My father was in absolute shock following this consultation. It all seemed just so matter of fact.
8. Dr [GRO-D] had not run any tests on my father which meant his diagnosis must already have been in his medical records. It makes me so angry that my father was never told about his infection prior to this appointment.
9. Later correspondence confirms that my father would have been infected due to NHS treatment as per the exhibited document (WITN2886002.)
10. To make matters worse, this news had followed only five months after my mother's premature death at the age of 47, from a brain aneurysm. In hindsight, I strongly suspect the infection had caused my mother's death too.
11. My three siblings passed away from their condition and my other sister was killed due to a domestic violence incident. Only my younger brother and myself remained.

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

12. I am not aware of my father being exposed to any other infections.

#### **Section 4. Consent.**

13. We did not know when my father was tested for Hepatitis C and as such we could not have consented to these tests. It came as a complete shock to us when we were made aware of his diagnosis.
14. I believe it is very much possible they were using his test results for the purposes of research. It is something that has been on my mind considering the same thing happened to my siblings.

#### **Section 5. Impact**

15. Following my father's diagnosis, he became extremely depressed but refused antidepressants as he wanted to get through everything on his own. The news had also been broken so close to the deaths of my mother and brother so it was an extremely difficult time for everyone.
16. He would get up in the morning but he wouldn't leave the house unless I was there. He wouldn't even go to his own antique shop as an antique dealer, unless my cousin or I were with him. I stepped in as a care-giver for my father and would stay with him as much as I could, as he couldn't be left on his own, which led to the breakdown of my first marriage.
17. My father would set himself little goals following his diagnosis to help get him through; wanting to see my son, Joseph go to school, wanting to see him start high school etc. He was very close to Joseph and I do believe this helped him in his own way.
18. He underwent treatment for the Hepatitis C infection shortly after his diagnosis at the Gartnavel Hospital, as there was a specialist unit set up for people with Hepatitis C. He was put on a course of Interferon for a year but it was unsuccessful and was quickly moved on to a second course of treatment which was a combination of Interferon and Ribavirin. After the second course of treatment they said that the virus was gone, only for it to return six months later. The treatment was finally stopped when he underwent a third course of treatment with Interferon and Ribavirin along with a new drug, but which also failed.

19. During the bouts of treatment, his depression became so severe that he became increasingly isolated and only reliant on me. He felt like his body was on fire and had no energy to do anything. It was difficult for him to get up, to get dressed and to eat; everything became a constant battle for him. I had remained hopeful following each treatment. The doctors also encouraged him to keep going and keep faith.
20. My father however felt dirty due to the virus. He was always a clean, well-groomed man, so being made to feel dirty was really hard for him. It was terrible for him being told that he couldn't even kiss his grandson. At the back of my mind I was also constantly worried about the potential risk of transmission to my son, as we both spent so much time with him. All of our time had to be spent with my father. My father would have done the same for me.
21. My father was diagnosed with liver cancer in 2012 and took the news really badly. At this point my entire life revolved around taking him from appointment to appointment. We immediately asked about possible treatments and he was quickly put on a course of chemotherapy, which ultimately shrunk the cancer down and bought us an extra three years. However it also took away his confidence, as he began suffering from terrible rigors, whilst undergoing this treatment which sent him spiralling downhill once more. He became scared of everything and did not want to undergo treatment again because it made him feel so bad. My once, lovely, brave and strong father, went back to being like a little child.
22. When I found out about my father's cancer, I bought a bottle of alcohol and drank the entire bottle whilst sitting in my car. Unfortunately I got caught and lost my license for two years. Caring became incredibly difficult because I was unable to drive around to complete errands. I also had to drop out of college in 2013 as my father was so ill and all of my time was spent caring for him.
23. He moved in with us for two weeks before he passed away. He had been in St Andrews Hospice but refused to die there; he wanted to die at home. We had Macmillan nurses and carers come in to care for him in the final few weeks and one of his neighbours spent time with him during the last few months of his life, as I was so exhausted. My father was very well liked amongst his neighbours. My son was doing a lot to help and my brother also started to support us more. My father passed away at home on 16<sup>th</sup> August 2014.
24. My father was a lovely man and a great father. He was kind to everybody, donated a lot of money to charity and I couldn't just leave him when he needed me so I spent a lot of time

caring for him. My father's infection and the time I spent caring for him had a huge impact on my relationships. My first husband left me in 1999 because I was spending so much time away and devoted less time to him.

25. I married again in 2005 and we were together for seven years, but our relationship broke down when I found out my father's cancer as I had a breakdown and just couldn't cope any longer. I also owned my own bridal shop at this time, but which collapsed after nine years, when I broke up with my husband.

26. I married a third time a few years ago, GRO-D  
GRO-D He was a family friend and so had known that as an antique dealer, my father would have had a significant amount of money to his name. My father had given my third husband money to buy a house to support me, GRO-D  
GRO-D I had to fight to keep the house GRO-D We divorced earlier this year and he took everything I had. At the point of divorce in February this year, he took the house my father had paid for; I just had no fight left in me.

27. Even friends I only ever saw rarely. I just never had time to see them and if I did make plans, I felt horrible guilt that I was leaving my father and son behind.

28. My own father was a better father to my son GRO-D. They spent a lot of time together and Joseph used to fondly call him 'Grandy'. Joseph took his death really badly and had already started to drink at the age of 14, when he became really poorly. I believe he was in denial and couldn't face what was happening. He kept himself to himself and didn't have many friends, mostly because of what was happening at home. He was a very clever boy but he wasn't one for studying. Joseph left school with 5 GCSEs, but if it wasn't for everything going on at this time it would have been completely different. He was meant to join the RAF but got himself into the wrong crowd. Fortunately, he recently got married and is now finally settled and happy. Despite this, I still feel all that happened was all too unfair on Joseph too; it was no life for a young boy.

29. Nobody knew about my father's condition because we were so worried about the stigma. I didn't tell my son until he was old enough to fully understand and comprehend it all. My younger brother had five children so he kept them all distant. I think he and his wife might

have been scared to visit as they were worried about the risk of transmission. It was only after my dad died that my brother and I started to get close again. We were the only ones left so we had to become close.

30. The type of man my father was could be best evidenced when he decided to still donate £5000 to the hospital to their blood testing unit because he could see the help the hospital needed, despite his own hardships and despite how he had been treated.

31. In 2013, I was forced into bankruptcy and survived as a carer on £62 per week. I had been spending all of my time with my father and I had absolutely no time to maintain a household let alone a job. There were piles of bills that I didn't have time to open, which eventually amounted to roughly £5,500. I didn't have the money to pay it and there was no way I was going to ask my father for money. It just wouldn't be in my nature to ask for help.

32. I felt like I had my life taken away from me. I was only ever caring for my father, because no one else would do it. I feel absolutely terrible for my son because he was the one who lost his childhood. I wasn't able to devote any attention to him at all.

33. When my father was dying, one of the things he asked me was to make sure that something was done about the scandal. This is now the last thing on his list. He wanted me to keep fighting, which is why I have to do this.

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

34. I have never been offered counselling or support despite how vulnerable I had become.

35. I had to get rid of some of the carers because of the way they were treating my father. They were evil. The level of care that is offered to you is frankly not good enough, especially considering what people like my father have been through.

## **Section 7. Financial Assistance**

36. The Brownlee Centre applied to the Skipton Fund for my father. He received the stage one and two payments and later started to receive monthly payments of around £1200.

37. I got in touch with the Caxton Foundation soon after my father's death who contributed £3,500 to assist me in arranging his funeral.

38. I hadn't really encountered any problems with any of the financial assistance schemes. It was probably one of the easiest things throughout the ordeal.

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

39. I have been to numerous meetings and sat among the people who are going through what I have already witnessed. I think it is disgusting what the Government has put people through. So many people have died and it seems like the Government are waiting for more to die before they admit what they have done wrong. People's lives should be made more comfortable and there should be private healthcare made available.

40. My father had a horrible death. It was a horrible way to go, and we didn't have the support available to give both him and I the help we needed. I was a full time carer to him on £62 per week and I didn't get any help until the final month of his life.

41. My dad should still be here; he died way too early and I will never know if my mother was also infected. I am doing this to fulfil my father's final wishes; this is the final thing left on his list and I intend to see it through.

### **Anonymity, disclosure and redaction**

42. I do not wish to remain anonymous.

43. I would be happy to give oral evidence.

### **Statement of Truth**

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

Signed...

GRO-C

(CAROLINE M. HIGGINS)

Previously Called

Dated.....

14/10/19