

Witness Name: Heather Vanessa Gower

Statement No: WITN1659001

Exhibits: 0

Dated: March 2019

## INFECTED BLOOD INQUIRY

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### FIRST WRITTEN STATEMENT OF HEATHER VANESSA GOWER

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I, Heather Vanessa Gower will say as follows:-

#### Section 1. Introduction

1. My name is Heather Vanessa Gower. I was born on GRO-C 1957 and I live at GRO-C London, GRO-C. I am married and live with my husband. I am currently not working and assist my husband with his care, although my daughter is my husband's full carer.
2. I make this statement in relation to my husband, Michael John Gower (who has also produced a statement 'WITN1748001'.
3. We have a daughter together, Joanna Victoria Gower, who has also produced a statement, 'WITN1658001'.
4. This witness statement has been prepared without the benefit of access to my husband's full 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**

5. My husband suffers from severe Haemophilia A and his clotting factor is -1%. He was diagnosed with Haemophilia in 1946 when he was 1 year old following a mouth bleed after biting his lip.
6. I believe Michael received Cryoprecipitate until the 1970s and then he started receiving Factor VIII (FVIII) in the mid 1970s/late mid 1970s. I believe he was not told why the treatment changed from Cryoprecipitate to FVIII. Michael received FVIII as and when he had a bleed.
7. I believe Michael was infected with Hepatitis B (Hep B), Hepatitis C (Hep C) and HIV at the Royal London Hospital where he was treated by Dr Brian Colvin. He is now under the care of a Dr Pasi as Dr Colvin has retired.
8. We were not provided with any information or advice beforehand about the risk of being exposed to infections. I believe we should have been told as we had a child together and there was a risk that Michael could have passed on the infections to me or our daughter. After Michael found out about the Hep C infection, I was subsequently tested for it and fortunately, tested negative. It only became apparent after the test that the infection could be transmitted.
9. Prior to our marriage in 1979, Michael just told me about the Hep B. I was not provided with any information about the risk of being infected as a result of Hep B or HIV, but I knew from the doctors' and the nurses' attitudes that HIV was very serious. We got most of the information from the media.
10. For more detailed information about how Michael found out about his HIV and Hep C status, please refer to his witness statement, 'WITN1748001'.

## **Section 3. Other Infections**

11. Michael's witness statement (WITN1748001) details this section further.

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

12. Michael's witness statement (**WITN1748001**) details this section further.

#### **Section 5. Impact of the Infection**

13. Michael suffered mental effects as a result of the infections. I do not think the impact of Hep C was as bad as HIV on him. The HIV destroyed his life and affected him mentally quite badly. He was told by his GP that he had a 6 month life expectancy. Michael suffered depression as he thought he was not going to be around for long.

14. He also suffered physical effects as a result of the infections. He had jaundice and sleeping problems. He also lost a lot of weight. I recall Michael having night sweats.

15. As stated in Michael's witness statement (**WITN1748001**), Michael suffered many medical complications and conditions as a result of the infections.

16. Michael was offered AZT treatment for his HIV but initially refused to take it as he did not want to use drugs that had not been tested yet and proven to work. He also heard horror stories in relation to the side effects that the treatment had and therefore did not want to take them. However, in the late 1990s, he was getting quite poorly, his cd4 count was very high and he was told to start taking the treatment. He now takes three tablets a day for the HIV.

17. In the mid 1990s, Michael was put on a 6 month trial for Interferon treatment for the Hep C infection but the treatment did not work. In or about 2015, he had a second course of treatment called Harvoni which finally cleared the Hep C.

18. I do not know whether there were any treatments which I consider ought to have been available, but were not made available to Michael.

19. Michael did not suffer any mental and physical effects of the treatments he received. I guess he was lucky in this respect.

20. Michael's infected status impacted on the medical treatment he received. He was treated very badly whenever he had operations and investigative procedures at the hospital. Once, he had a haemorrhage in his elbow after a joint replacement operation but the nurses would not come and call the doctor to treat him. When the doctors did come, it was too late and they had to reopen his wound and surgically clean it, causing a setback in recovery time. Dr Colvin apologised profusely. Michael is always at end of surgical lists, so if an emergency comes in, he is moved to the last spot on the next day, this means he is left nil by mouth, all day, once for three days running. In 1985 when he was to be treated at hospital for his elbow operation, his family came over. There were signs on his door saying 'do not enter, AIDS patient'. This really upset Michael, devastated his family, and friends and revealed his diagnosis to work colleagues who visited.

21. Michael's private, family and social life was heavily impacted as a result of the infections. He was told that he had 6 months to live. He had a finite amount of time left to live and it was just really hard for him. He did not have a social life and even some of [GRO-C] would not speak to him. One of his [GRO-C] [GRO-C] [GRO-C] Another [GRO-C] [GRO-C] are not in contact with him and I believe it is because of the infected status.

22. I was also affected physically, mentally and emotionally as a result of Michael's infections and it had a huge impact on my private, family and social life. I was in a complete daze for years. We were a close family [GRO-C] [GRO-C] [GRO-C] My parents were more worried about my daughter who was just 4 years old experiencing her father go through such a terrible situation. My best friend (since schooldays) cut all contact with me after she found out that Michael had HIV.

23. Michael's HIV destroyed our lives and we lost everything. It fractured our family when his HIV status was exposed to everyone and sundry by nursing

staff on the ward where he was being treated and as a result it has never been fixed. At the same time, I was intimidated into stopping intimate contact with him under the threat of losing my daughter. GRO-C

GRO-C Also the fact of being told Michael was terminal with little time left to live, changed the way we made future plans around pension, insurance, savings and lifestyle which has had an impact on our lives. We also wanted more children, but because of Michael's infected status it scared us to have more children. Later on it became apparent that Michael was not in an infectious stage of HIV (we had no idea if Hep C can infect a foetus) but by then it was too late as my health was too bad. However during this period I suffered from greatly from depression cause by secondary infertility. I became upset in the presence of babies and small children. This caused resentment with my daughter as she got older as she thought she was not enough for me. GRO-C

GRO-C

24. My relationship with my daughter was damaged as I surrendered her primary care to my husband to give him as much time with her as possible before he died. This withdrawal affected us for so many years, and my daughter was very badly affected by living with the stigma of HIV. It affected her schooling, socialising and relationships with relatives, many of whom had cut all contact with us fearing contamination.
25. When a HIV test was offered to me, I did not want to take it. All our life together, I had been at risk and I expected to be tested positive. However, I was forced to be tested and told if I tested positive, then my daughter would need to be taken into care. That mentally affected me more as I did not know whether I should stay in the relationship or not. For approximately a year I was very depressed and I did not really go out of the house.
26. I now live with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which was diagnosed in the mid 1990s, and I have had therapy and treatment for clinical depression for over 20 years. I am 61 years old now and never had a chance to earn a pension and owing to my own acquired disability, I will be reliant on benefits if

my husband predeceases me. I am on anti-depressants medication. All these issues were caused as a result of Michael being infected and everything that we had been through as a result.

27. There was a stigma attached to HIV at the time. It was awful. When belonging to a support group we saw first hand the stigma, for example, where undertakers refused to carry a sealed coffin without rubber gloves and masks on, where people were not allowed to use the family bathroom and made to go toilet in a bucket. Our next door neighbour, with whom we had had a good relationship with, would spray bleach over the fence if we went in the garden, and reported us to the council if we let our dog poo in the garden because she was afraid of infected flies going in her kitchen. We moved and that was one of the reasons why we kept it quiet.

28. Our daughter was only 4 years old when she worked out herself that Michael had HIV. She was watching TV one day when an advertisement about AIDS came up. She just looked at it and asked me whether her father had AIDS. I did not keep it a secret from her as I did not want to lie to her, especially about something so big that could affect her life.

29. Michael suffered work-related affects as a result of the infections. He was moved from to a different department, which was isolated. He had no one to talk to all day. He gave up the job because he was unable to cope with having no one to talk to. He was in his 40s by then. This had a massive financial effect on him as he could no longer work.

30. In the 1990s we joined a local support group for people with AIDS. I was not working at that time and I found it impossible to go back to work because of what happened to Michael. It had a financial impact on me as we could not afford to buy a property of our own which we would have liked to have done.

#### **Section 6. Treatment/care/support**

31. I do not believe Michael faced any difficulties or obstacles in obtaining treatment, care and support in consequence of being infected.

32. Michael was not offered any counselling or psychological support as a result of being infected.

33. I received counselling 10 years ago but I did not receive counselling at the time when we first found out that Michael was infected. In the 1990s, there was a HIV counsellor but she was also my friend and so I could not talk to her about it. If counselling was offered I would have accepted it and I believe it would assisted me.

34. In the 1980s, we wanted to look into fostering. We were working with a social worker for some time before we realised that they were never going to let us foster a child because of Michael's infected status.

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

35. Michael received financial assistance from the Macfarlane Trust and the Skipton Fund. He also receives a monthly payment from the EIBSS. Please refer to Michael's witness statement for more information about the financial assistance he received and he receives (WITN1748001).

36. I have not received any financial assistance.

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

37. My health has suffered as a result of Michael's infections even though I was not infected with Hep C or HIV. I have impaired mobility, PTSD and clinical depression. It seems like the only criteria the Trust and Fund take into consideration when deciding whether to provide financial assistance is infection. I do not think that the system is fair.

38. I have PTSD as a result of this scandal and although it was my choice to stay with Michael, I would have appreciated some help along the way but did not get it as I was not infected.

Anonymity, disclosure and redaction

39. I confirm that I do not wish to apply for anonymity and that I understand this statement will be published and disclosed as part of the Inquiry.

40. I do not want to give oral evidence to the Inquiry.

**Statement of Truth**

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

Signed

GRO-C

Dated

28/3/19