

Witness Name: Erika Abbatt

Statement No: W7244-001

Exhibits:1

Dated: 27 October 2022

INFECTED BLOOD INQUIRY

FIRST WRITTEN STATEMENT OF ERIKA ABBATT

I, Erika Abbatt will say as follows:-

Section 1. Introduction

1. My name is Erika Abbatt. I reside at GRO-C
GRO-C Malaga, Spain. My date of birth is GRO-C 1967. I live with my husband. I have two adult stepsons and a granddaughter who live in Dublin and my father and sister reside in the UK. I am a British Citizen and a permanent Spanish Resident. Prior to retirement I worked as an HR Rewards and Benefits Specialist/Manager in the banking industry.
2. This witness statement has been prepared without the benefit of access to my 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 infected

3. In September 1982 I met my boyfriend at school. I was 15 years old. When we met, he explained to me that he had haemophilia. I remember one day he showed me his fridge at home and it was full of Factor VIII concentrate bottles so

he was obviously on home treatment at that time. He was always going to hospital or having a bleed in a joint. Otherwise, he seemed healthy, so I accepted it for what it was. He had a blood clotting disorder and medication to treat it. I never thought for one moment that this medication in clean sterile bottles would harm either of us as, then, I naively trusted the health service.

4. One day, out of the blue, sometime in late 1982 or early 1983 my boyfriend phoned me at home to say that I needed to go to the Sheffield Royal Hallamshire Hospital to see his consultant at the haemophilia unit on ward P2. He had been infected with Hepatitis B from a contaminated batch of Factor VIII treatment.
5. I went with my Mum to see his consultant and he took blood tests. The tests showed I had contracted Hepatitis B from my boyfriend. We had not had sex so they think I had contracted it from kissing as my boyfriend suffered bleeding gums and I had a nervous habit of chewing my cheek.
6. I was mortified and upset, and I felt afraid of infecting my family. My boyfriend was very upset that he had infected me. I was told I had to use my own separate crockery, cutlery, towels etc., and wait for the virus to clear. I remember I had to wash my pots separately after dinner and dry them on a separate tea towel. I felt contaminated.
7. I did not blame my boyfriend he didn't know there was a risk and he didn't know he had been infected. I blamed and still blame the NHS and the doctors treating us who prescribed Factor VIII in full knowledge that it was likely contaminated and came from dubious sources. Blood sold, not donated, for money by prisoners and drug addicts, populations with high levels of Hepatitis B. It does not take a qualified doctor to see that is high risk.
8. The doctor who diagnosed me never mentioned HIV or Hepatitis C. He never explained to me that Hepatitis B has no cure and can lead to liver cancer. He led me to believe it was nothing serious, nothing to worry about.
9. When I was 16, I received a letter dated 31 August 1983 from Charles Hay, Senior Registrar in Haematology at Sheffield Hallamshire Hospital. The letter

confirmed a phone conversation I had with Dr Hay where he said I was no longer "significantly" infectious but that I would always be a Hepatitis B carrier and could pass it on to someone else via my blood. The irony of it when I was told never to donate blood for the rest of my life!

10. I was told on the phone that I must always inform my dentist or any health professional likely to have contact with my blood of my Hepatitis B infection. He told me to keep the letter in case I ever needed to prove anything. I wasn't sure what I might need to prove but I kept the letter and attach it to my witness statement.

Section 3. Other Infections

11. I am not aware of any other infections, although I was possibly exposed to Hepatitis C and vCJD at the same time I contracted Hepatitis B as my boyfriend was exposed to both.

Section 4. Consent

12. I do not know if I was ever tested for Hepatitis C or HIV back in 1982/83, but if I was it was without my knowledge or consent and I was never informed of any results.

Section 5. Impact of the Infection

13. Around 1986 HIV and AIDS were all over the press and television. I distinctly remember the black and white advertising campaign filled with gravestones and death. By then, I was acutely aware of the risks of HIV transmission, as well as Hepatitis B via Factor VIII products. Every time I saw the advert or the double page spread in the newspaper a chill ran down my spine.

14. My mother worked for the Aids Education Project in Sheffield and there were HIV/AIDS leaflets lying around in our house as she distributed them to at risk

groups. It was a constant reminder. I was terrified, but also afraid to discuss it, even with my Mum. It was the elephant in the room from my perspective.

15. I felt tarnished and self-conscious about it. Hepatitis B was associated with HIV/AIDS, drug addicts and prostitutes and at that time had a big stigma attached, fuelled by the government's media campaign. It became my life long secret, a stigma I have lived with for the last 40 years.

16. I remember every time I told a health professional their reaction was one of visible shock and then the next judgemental question was "how did you catch it?" As if I had been a drug addict or sleeping around. I felt judged when they knew nothing about me. I was afraid, due to the stigma, to tell anyone, except when I absolutely had to. I dread changing doctor or dentist. It was hard to bring up the subject with new partners especially when I was young. I stuck to long term relationships. I felt ashamed, when it is the doctors, NHS and government who should hang their heads in shame.

17. In the late 1980s I read newspaper articles about Hepatitis C, at the time, described as the silent killer. I spent years wondering if I had also been infected with HIV or Hepatitis C. I kept telling myself they would trace me if they thought that, I was registered with a GP.

18. After 10 years or so I concluded for my own sanity that if I had HIV I would have had symptoms by now but the Hepatitis C worries remained. I was afraid to get pregnant in case I gave Hepatitis B to the baby during childbirth. I have never had children as a result.

19. Every time I have to complete a medical questionnaire, I brace myself for the questions. I was always afraid I would be turned down for jobs or access to the company pension scheme or private medical insurance which is a requirement as a Spanish resident. I was always sent for a medical. I was sent for medicals before being offered a job contract or health insurance because of declaring Hepatitis B on my health questionnaire. It is humiliating having to explain every time how I got infected. It was made more embarrassing for me as I worked in

Human Resources and the people handing my health questionnaires would become my work colleagues.

20. Over the years I have seen different GPs and asked for Hepatitis C and HIV tests. I was always talked out of it. More than one doctor said I would never get a mortgage or life insurance if I had a test. One said there was no point being tested as there was no cure for Hepatitis C. Another suggested that if I really wanted the test I should go to the VD clinic, as it was called then, reinforcing the stigma once again. I went, hoping no one would recognise me, and they talked me out of it saying I would need counselling first and its very upsetting. I was young and not assertive enough, just plucking up the courage to raise the subject with my GP was bad enough. They did nothing to alleviate my anxiety. I tried my best to forget about it, but every time a few years later something new comes up and adds to the anxiety, first HIV, then a few years later Hepatitis C, then my own health issues.

21. I lost contact with my former boyfriend at the end of our relationship in 1985 so I did not know his health situation until I recently read his witness statement to the inquiry (WITN2885001). It was a difficult read to learn how badly his life has been affected. Sadly, he has also been infected with Hepatitis C and exposed to vCJD. I was right therefore to be concerned as he was told he was very likely infected at the same time as his Hepatitis B infection, during the two years we were in a relationship.

22. I have lived with the anxiety and stigma ever since my Hepatitis B infection. Would the Hepatitis B cause me liver problems in the future? Could I have contracted HIV, Hepatitis C or vCJD? It affected my first marriage and the fact that I didn't have children. It is always there at the back of your mind, you try to forget but it never leaves you.

23. I don't drink alcohol, I have a healthy lifestyle and I have never smoked or used drugs. I recently had an MRI scan on my spine for a back problem and they identified that I have multiple liver cysts. Is that connected to my Hepatitis B infection? I don't know. I await an ultrasound scan. My GP says not to worry, but why would I ever trust a doctor again?

24. That trust, which is fundamental in a doctor-patient relationship, was broken forever when I was only 15/16 years old. I recently requested a Hepatitis C test again and my Spanish GP didn't try to talk me out of it. Thankfully it was negative for Hepatitis C, but there is evidence of the previous Hepatitis B infection. All those years of worry could have been avoided had they traced and tested me back in the late 1980s or if the UK GPs had not refused me tests when I made the request.

25. At 15 and 16 years of age myself and my boyfriend should have never been infected with Hepatitis via contaminated Factor VIII as the risks of transmission in this way were well known to the NHS doctors at that time and could have been avoided. The mental as well as physical impact of this on teenagers and their subsequent life choices at a time when the government created a huge public stigma was significantly damaging.

Section 6. Treatment/care/support

26. I never received any treatment for my Hepatitis B infection. I was never offered any follow-up checks, further screening, support or counselling at the time of my Hepatitis B infection or when I requested tests for HIV and Hepatitis C.

Section 7. Financial Assistance

27. I have never received any financial assistance or compensation in respect of my infection. I believe all those infected regardless of whether it is with Hepatitis B, C or HIV should be compensated for the negligence of the NHS in knowingly administering unsafe treatments. The NHS failed to consider the consequences, not only for those given the infected Factor VIII/blood transfusions but for those who were not even in need of medical treatment but infected by family members and others in close relationships.

Section 8. Other Issues

28. I would like to know why people potentially infected were not traced and tested? Why, when my former boyfriend was eventually diagnosed with Hepatitis C did they not trace me and offer me a test? I didn't leave the UK until 2010 and I was registered with a GP on the NHS so there is no excuse for this. I would have been easy to trace via my NHS records.

29. I was very fortunate that I did not contract Hepatitis C or HIV, but I should never have contracted Hepatitis B as a result of contaminated Factor VIII either. I hope that in providing this statement and the hospital letter I received as evidence to the Inquiry it corroborates the statement made by my former boyfriend and contributes to finding justice for him and for those infected and affected in such an appalling way. The government response compared to other countries is shameful beyond belief.

Anonymity

30. I do not wish to remain anonymous.

31. I do wish 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

27 October 2022.