

Witness Name: Donna Spence

Statement No. WITN7348001

Dated: 22nd November 2022

INFECTED BLOOD INQUIRY

FIRST WRITTEN STATEMENT OF DONNA SPENCE

I provide this statement in response to a request under Rule 9 of the Inquiry rules 2006 dated 7th October 2022. I adopt the paragraph numbering in the Rule 9 request for ease of reference.

I, Donna Spence will say as follows:-

1. **Introduction**

1. My name is Donna Spence. My date of birth is GRO-C 1966 and my address is known to the Inquiry.
2. I work as a self-employed Photographer for a Photographic Production Company.
3. I make this statement in support of my stepson, Benjamin Oliver (Ben), who was infected with hepatitis C after receiving contaminated blood products for his haemophilia.

2. **How Affected**

1. I met Ben and his brother GRO-B for the first time at the end of 1989. Ben would have been approximately 11 years old at the time. His father and I began a relationship and later, married.
2. Ben and I got on well and I felt that I had a good relationship with both boys.
3. We worked to a routine where their dad and I would have the boys every other weekend. We were very active as a family. In the summer months, we would often take the boys to stay at our caravan where we would often go bike riding, windsurfing, swimming as well as other activities.
4. I was unaware of Ben's hepatitis C infection until he came to tell his dad and I that he had bumped his head whilst on a night out and had needed to go to Rake Lane Hospital in Tyneside. He explained that whilst he was at the hospital the doctor had informed him that his records showed that he had had a previously been infected with hepatitis C.
5. This incident happened during the time of the AIDS awareness campaign but at this time, hepatitis C was not as sensationalised. I knew however, that hepatitis could be a serious condition.
6. I am not sure of the nature of Ben's haemophilia, but I do remember Ben and his brother having to attend a 'special' centre because of their haemophilia before being referred to the hospital for any dental treatment. They would often get blood blisters in their mouths. I cannot however recall which hospital they attended for this treatment.
7. I remember that Ben received Factor VIII treatment and believe that he may also have been treated with Cryoprecipitate.

8. As young boys, Ben and his brother were under the care of Doctor Peter Jones and his assistant, Maureen Fearn at the Newcastle Royal Victoria Infirmary (RVI). I recall they would call her Auntie Maureen.
9. Ben would often have sporting injuries and would need to attend the Haemophilia Centre to get them treated. At one time, I was beginning to think Ben was being bullied because of his constant injuries. I wasn't used to seeing such injuries on a child for no apparent reason. It was all new to me.
10. To my knowledge, no advice was ever provided to Ben, or us about the risk of being exposed to infection.
11. To my knowledge, Ben was only infected with hepatitis C.
12. As I explained earlier in my statement, Ben was not aware of his hepatitis C infection until he attended the hospital after receiving a bang on the head. No information was provided to him on that occasion or since concerning his infection with hepatitis C and no information has ever been provided to us.

3. **Other Infections**

1. To my knowledge, Ben was only infected with hepatitis C.

4. **Consent**

1. I believe that there is a strong possibility that Ben was treated/tested without his knowledge and consent without full information and possibly for the purposes of research.

5. **Impact**

1. After Ben was informed of his hepatitis C infection, his personality changed. He began drinking alcohol to excess and subsequently became alcohol dependent. He also became extremely GRO-D GRO-D. I recall that he would have regular periods of heavy drinking and then come to stay with us for about 6 months at a time to dry out.
2. After Ben was informed that he had hepatitis C, it was as though he had decided to 'live life to the max'. He became an adrenaline junkie and threw himself into extreme sports such as windsurfing, snowboarding, skateboarding, motorbikes and cars. He excelled in anything that was fast and furious.
3. Ben's erratic behaviour caused a lot of strain and distress for Graham and I and to the rest of the family. So much so, that we split up for about 7 weeks before getting back together again.
4. On occasions I would lend Ben money and my car, but he was so GRO-D.
5. I can recall an occasion when Ben attempted suicide. He called me on the telephone to tell me what he had done and asked me to pick him up and bring him home. Although it was a really hard decision, I had to tell him that there was no way I could bring him home. The family had suffered enough. I still went to collect him but took him to his friend's house. I felt extremely upset about having to do this, but I had to think of the other children.
6. Before Ben went off the rails, I remember him as a lovely boy, he was very caring and giving. He lived with us from the age of about 15 years. He went to school and then college, and we enjoyed lovely few years together.

7. When Ben was about 16 or 18 years old he also took an interest in photography and took a photography course.
8. I find that I question myself sometimes as to whether I am a good person after refusing Ben the safety of his home after his suicide attempt. It gives me feelings of guilt, but I had to consider the other children at home. Ben's **GRO-D** behaviour was getting out of hand.
9. Ben had a good but distant relationship with his siblings. They became aware of the upset in the home resulting from Ben's suicide attempt because of hushed tones and whispers between the adults. They were also aware of his alcoholism and **GRO-D** behaviour. Ben was not encouraged to visit the family home while he was drinking.

6. Treatment/Care/Support

1. I do not have information to add to this section.

7. Financial Assistance

1. I have heard of the Skipton Fund, but only through listening to conversations between Ben and his Uncle Mike.
2. I am unaware as to whether Ben has received any financial assistance as a result of his hepatitis C infection.

8. Other Issues

1. I am aware that when Ben was informed that he had previously been infected with hepatitis C the three pages containing further information relating to his infection were missing from his records without any explanation as to why this was.

2. I find it very strange that these specific pages were missing from Ben's records and this to me, suggests a cover up. I would like the Inquiry to consider what was the motive for removing these pages?

Statement of Truth

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

Signed. GRO-C

Dated..... 22/11/2022