

Witness Name: Ronan Casey Fitzgerald

Statement No.: WITN1874001

Dated: 7August 2019

WRITTEN STATEMENT OF RONAN CASEY FITZGERALD

INFECTED BLOOD INQUIRY

Section 1. Introduction

1. My date of birth is GRO-C 1982 and my address is known to the Inquiry.
2. I am married with two children, a daughter aged 18 and a son aged 8. I am a Fields Operations Manager for Openreach Ltd.

Section 2. How Affected

3. In 1978 my mother Jane Yvonne Fitzgerald was given a transfusion of one unit of blood at Royal Victoria Hospital in Boscombe, to treat an ectopic pregnancy, when she was 17 years old. My mother was left infected with Hepatitis C ("HCV"). My mother lost her battle due to liver failure on 13th November 2015, at 11:33pm aged 53 years old.
4. For further details of my mother's diagnosis, please see the statement of my father Barry Fitzgerald.

5. I do not know if my mother was ever told of the risk of passing on HCV to others. I have often wondered if my mum worried that she could have passed it on to me and my brother. I never asked her.
6. I also think about all the many times I gave blood, especially during my army days. I gave blood not knowing at the time, that could well have had given blood that was infected with HCV.

Section 3. Other Infections

7. My mother was infected with HCV only.

Section 4. Consent

8. Please see the statement of my father, Barry Fitzgerald.

Section 5. Impact

9. Initially I remember mum developing itchy skin and broken veins. She also suffered with tiredness and pains.
10. Being infected with this disease changed my mother from the moment she found out. Mum always tried to protect my brother and me, but I know she always felt like she had been given a death sentence. She knew this disease would kill her and she knew it would shorten her life considerably. It took over her thoughts, every single day that she was alive. Although she had family and friends who loved her, my mother always felt alone with battling the disease.
9. The HCV slowly damaged my mother's liver, causing cirrhosis to develop.
10. In 2014 mum was asked to undergo a 12 week course of treatment to cure her HCV at Southampton General Hospital.

11. Part way through her treatment we all went on a 2nd 'last' family holiday. Our last two holidays were years apart but mum always considered each holiday to be her final one. This time she was right. It was clear that Mum's health started to noticeably deteriorate. By week 12 of the treatment Mum was told she was clear of the disease and we all had so much hope that this would give Mum's liver a fighting chance to recover.
12. The cirrhosis caused fluid to build up in her abdomen, legs and feet. As this ascites worsened, her liver was fitted with a stent which helped for a very short time before the ascites built up in volume and my mum had to have her abdomen drained roughly every 10 days. This experience was hell on earth for my mother. She had always had a fear of needles. She would turn up to appointments not knowing whether beds or drain equipment would be available, and spend hours waiting in uncomfortable hospital chairs, before a 6-12 hour draining of the ascites.
13. She was surrounded by drug addicts and alcoholics, and I think she felt she was being tarred by the same brush as these people by hospital staff. One time I had no option but to complain to Southampton General Hospital due to the way my mother was being treated on a regular basis. She was often left to wait for up to 7 hours before having her ascites drained, and on one occasion she was left for so long that her stomach split open due to pressure from the ascites. I still have a photo of her belly split open.
14. After several months of enduring these drains we were told the devastating news that the toxins had carried cancerous cells to her brain stem and that it was terminal. Around 6 weeks later mum suffered several small strokes and lost her fight 3 days later. On day 3 of a coma mum, unable to talk or open her eyes, finally acknowledged to us that she was going to die. My mother was cruelly taken from us and our lives have changed forever.

15. Even after death the battle continued. The cause of death was listed on my mother's death certificate as pneumonia, and I had to advise my father to fight to get contaminated blood put on mum's death certificate.
16. Prior to finding out about her HCV, my mother was a happy and a much warmer person. I believe the constant worry of an uncertain future and feeling alone, caused my mum much fear and stress. My mother found it much harder to get close to others. Looking back it felt like she thought it would be easier to die without upsetting more people than she had to.
17. Mum never really discussed how she felt with me as she knew my worry was affecting my own health. She never entertained any conversation that the disease was ever going to kill her, although we found notes planning her own funeral, shortly after she passed away.
18. My mother used to enjoy the occasional sociable drink with friends, but this stopped when she found out she had HCV. She vowed to never have another drink if meant it would help her chances to live as long as she could. The only time she broke this vow was when she became a grandmother on GRO-C 2010. She had a small glass of champagne to celebrate.
19. I don't remember the day my mother told me that she had been infected with HCV, but then the impact this had on my own health does seem to have impacted my ability to remember things. I didn't really know what HCV was at the time, but I do recall my parents telling me that there was no cure and that I should see my doctor to get tested. I certainly didn't fully appreciate the severity of the disease or the consequences. I either blocked it all out or was simply too caught up in my own life, to fully understand the situation.
20. As Mum began to feel worse I did a lot more research into the disease and I began to worry about her fate. The realisation that I was powerless to protect my mum from the disease, her inevitable suffering and a future without her, took hold and I struggled to deal with it all. I kept thinking things like, "why

has this happened to my mother?" and "those responsible must pay for what they have done."

21. The constant thinking of what this disease would do to my mother, alongside being a new father and working full time, affected my health. I was misdiagnosed for many months and treated for depression, until eventually being diagnosed with a hyperthyroid condition. I suffered with many debilitating symptoms including memory loss, struggling to climb a flight of stairs and severe headaches that left me bedridden. The thyroid disorder, which turned out to be a temporary attack, caused by prolonged stress and worry, has taken many years to overcome and has only really improved since Mum passed away as I don't have to worry about my mother suffering any more.
22. I struggled with the physical demands of my outside job and I struggled to help my wife raise our first child. The guilt exacerbated my ill health further. I also felt guilty for feeling so unwell, because it was nothing compared to what my mum was going through. I'd avoid leaving my house and I hated being around people, especially large crowds. I was full of anger and intolerance that my mother lost her life through no fault of her own and those responsible were allowed to walk free. I pushed many people away and I lost some very close friends.
23. I remember being told of the stigma my mother had to endure. One time she was forced to wait until the end of the day for a dentist treatment, as the staff were worried that she would infect other patients.
24. The whole experience has changed me forever. I think about my mum every single day. I know she should still be here with us. I wonder how long she would have lived, had she not received contaminated blood. I think about how I will never be able to help my mother with her shopping, as she will never grow old. My son will grow up without a memory of his nanny. My mother never lived to meet my brother's son and will miss his wedding in May this year. My father has lost his wife, long before time. It was not a natural

death. It was not my mother's fault and her death was horrific and totally avoidable. My mother had her life cruelly taken away and we have all been forced to live our lives without her.

25. The physical symptoms of HCV meant that it became increasingly more difficult for my mother to work. She was forced to stop working as her liver became more and more damaged. In the early days of getting her liver tested my parents would travel to Bristol or Paris at their own cost, due to a lack of accessible fibroscan equipment nearby and no financial support.
26. Financially, life has been much more of a struggle for my father since my mother became ill. Both my parents worked hard all their lives, but having HCV meant that my mum was not able to get mortgage protection insurance. When my mum passed away, her financial help ceased and my father was not able to re-mortgage the family home. Paying the bills became a struggle.

Section 6. Treatment/Care/Support

27. I know my mother initially missed out on treatment to cure the HCV due to her cirrhosis being too advanced. This was a massive blow as the treatment was 100% successful and could have cleared her of the virus much earlier. She later had this treatment but had the most severe cirrhosis of anyone who had taken the medication, and the damage was already done to her liver by the time she was cleared.
28. It was always my strong belief that my mother and other victims should have been given private healthcare but instead had to be mixed in with alcoholics and drug addicts in NHS waiting rooms. Mum was often left for hours before treatment or turned up for treatment but was sent home as the hospital did not have a spare bed or equipment.
29. I've also described Mum being forced to the back of the queue for routine dental treatment.

30. I received counselling at my workplace because the stress and worry about my mother's health, and the anger about what happened to her was affecting my ability to perform at work. I did not find the counselling beneficial.

Section 7. Financial Assistance

31. Please see the statement of my father Barry Fitzgerald.

Section 8. Other Issues

32. During my mother's research she discovered the Tainted Blood group. Through them she found out that many other victims had been infected and the size of this scandal became apparent. Mum still felt alone though as the majority of the Tainted Blood members are haemophiliacs and mum never really felt part of that group.
33. There was so much I never fully appreciated until now, when I look back and think of what Mum endured. My mother rarely complained. She never gave up her fight, even at the very end. When Mum passed, I found boxes and boxes of files of letters she had written to government officials and medical professionals asking for help, asking for more information and support.
34. I have been involved in some campaigning around contaminated blood but this has been limited due to working full time and childcare responsibilities.
35. My father and I went to London shortly after Mum died to see the Contaminated Blood debate at the Houses of Parliament. The topic was delayed at the last minute so the steel industry could be discussed first. This angered us as there were some very ill people who attended. It was a very long day and some had to miss out due to this callous last minute delay. It was lovely to meet so many other people affected or infected for the first time, having only ever spoken on social media. It was very sad but nice to finally not feel totally alone.

36. I hope the Inquiry brings those responsible to justice. I want them to be forced to fully understand the impact this has had on so many lives. Not just those they have killed before their time, but also the families and friends whose lives have been totally torn apart.
37. I want people who have struggled with ill health and left without those closest to them, or had careers destroyed or struggled to pay their bills and mortgages, to be compensated financially.
38. I want the Inquiry to provide education to the world to learn from past mistakes and prevent it ever happening again. It's the biggest medical disaster in history so it should be a part of medical education.

Statement of Truth

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

SIGNED

GRO-C

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RONAN CASEY FITZGERALD

DATED

.....7 August 2019.....