

Witness Name: Marie Cromie

Statement No: WITN2429001

Exhibits: **WITN2429002**

Dated: 24th February 2019

INFECTED BLOOD INQUIRY

FIRST WRITTEN STATEMENT OF MARIE CROMIE

I provide this statement in response to a request under Rule 9 of the Inquiry rules 2006 dated 13th November 2018. I adopt the paragraph numbering in the Rule 9 request for ease of reference.

I, Marie Cromie, will say as follows:-

1. Introduction

1. My name is Marie Cromie. My date of birth is **GRO-C** 1958 and my address is known to the Inquiry.
2. I live at the above address with my husband, Russell. My husband is retired. We married in 1980. After I left school, I worked as a shop assistant. I then worked in a college as a kitchen assistant.
3. I have two children. My son is also called Russell (DOB: **GRO-c**/81) and my daughter Danielle Mullan (DOB: **GRO-c**/87).
4. I took a break from working when I had the children.

5. I have always lived in the Belfast area. I was somebody who enjoyed good health. I was not aware that I had any underlying health issues. I led a full and active life.

2.How Infected

1. After I had my first child, Russell in 1981, I returned home from hospital. It must have been a week or two later that I suddenly collapsed at home. I was rushed to Craigavan Hospital. When I came round, I recall seeing bags of blood around the bed. I had obviously had a blood transfusion. I was told by the hospital staff that I had lost blood and was anaemic, so they had indeed given me a transfusion. There was no real explanation given to me about what had happened in detail. There was certainly no discussion about the blood I had received.
2. I was in hospital for about 5 or 6 days. When I was discharged, I assumed everything would be okay, I was not aware of there being any problem or issues arising. I was told many years later, in 2007, after my first liver operation by my Consultant Dr Calendar at the Royal Hospital that he had looked back at my records and that I had received infected blood in Craigavan when I had the bleed after my first child.

3.Other infections

1. I am not aware of receiving any infection or infections other than Hepatitis C.

4.Consent

1. A liver function test was carried out on me in November 1981 at the request of my GP at the time a Dr GRO-D who had a surgery in Tynan village Armagh (which no longer exists) this test was carried out on me without my knowledge or consent. I was never informed of the results of this test nor was I given adequate or full information as to its results or impact. I only became aware of

this test when I received copies of my medical records. Whilst I was in Craigavon Hospital I was never informed that this test had been taken. Exhibited before me at WITN2429002 is the liver function test from 1981.

5. Impact

1. I subsequently had my daughter Danielle in 1987.
2. I was working in 2005 as a school traffic controller ("lollypop lady"). My health up until this time was pretty good until I started to feel very tired and weak. My legs started giving me a lot of pain and I found standing very difficult.
3. I can remember it was the Friday of the week I was feeling very poorly. I did not know what was wrong. I went to the local health centre and saw my GP a Doctor White who told me I should go along to hospital. I was referred to the Belfast City Hospital and they did some blood tests. I was told that I would have to have more tests the next day.
3. Following the weekend, on the Monday, I was given an appointment to see the Gastroenterologist. He was a Consultant Dr GRO-D I saw him with my husband. He told me, very bluntly, that I had hepatitis C (HCV). I was stunned and shocked. There had never been any suggestion before that I had this illness. I remember the Consultant rambled on about the effects of this, but it was all a bit of a blur. I remember him saying things like I would not be able to share a toothbrush with anyone not that I ever have. He started asking me about whether I had taken drugs, whether I had had any tattoos, had I "slept around". Of course none of those things applied to me. I had been married very happily for 25 years. I had never done drugs or had a tattoo. Asking me such questions was terribly upsetting and made me feel quite embarrassed and ashamed in a way.
4. I was then referred to a doctor at the Royal Victoria Hospital Belfast who was a liver specialist by the name of Dr Callender. I was told that as a result of my

hepatitis C I had liver sclerosis starting and they would have to keep a close eye on me.

5. I recall one night I was at home upstairs in bed as I was feeling very unwell. I think this was around 2005 but I am not sure of the month. I was violently sick. It was dark so I did not actually see what I had thrown up, but I distinctly remember that it did not feel like vomit and when I put the light on, I realised that I was bringing up blood. My husband was out of the house that night, which made the situation even more scary. My daughter was home and she had to help.
6. I had an ambulance take me to the Royal Hospital in Belfast. I was put in intensive care. My family were told that it was "touch and go" and I might die. They could not seem to stop the bleeding. However, after a lengthy procedure, they managed to staunch the bleeding. My husband was told that the next 12 hours were crucial and that if I had another bleed I would probably not survive. I remained in ITU for some days and then was transferred to a ward. I was told that veins in my throat had burst and that my liver was badly damaged. I was told that I would need a liver transplant. I had to go back and forth to the hospital after that for constant monitoring of the repairs to my throat and treatment for fluid that had started to gather in my legs.
7. There was a frustrating and worrying wait for the new liver. I began gradually getting to the point of no return, where I would be too ill and it would be too late to give me a new liver. If that happened, I was bound to die. At this time I was not yet 50. I should have still been in good health, earning money and enjoying family life. However, I was effectively waiting to die. At one point they thought they had found a liver, but it turned out to be a mis-match. That was a crushing blow. I resigned myself to dying. Then virtually, at the last minute, they got word that they had a possible match. The search for a liver had been made more difficult by the fact that I needed what was known as a "beating heart" liver. That is a liver from somebody who was on life support.

8. I then underwent the liver transplant in 2007 at Kings College Hospital, London. I was in the Intensive Care Unit (ITU) for about 7 days and spent a total of 3 weeks in Kings before being transferred home to the Royal Victoria Hospital for another 4 weeks where upon I was deemed well enough to go home. It was at this point that my consultant in Kings College Hospital, Dr O'Grady, informed me that my old liver had been cancerous. It was after that first operation that my Consultant Dr Calendar back at the Royal Victoria Hospital asked me if I had ever had a blood transfusion. I told him that I had one back in 1981. He told me all about the Skipton Fund and that people could get some financial assistance for hepatitis C and having had a transplant. He urged me to look into that. He was extremely helpful and supportive. He said we would need to get some evidence of my having had a blood transfusion and that my husband should contact Craigavan Hospital and try and check out the medical records there, to confirm the blood transfusion in 1981.
9. I can remember being absolutely stunned to have been told that the cause of all my serious illness was down to being given infected blood all those years ago. My husband was furious.
10. My husband contacted Craigavan Hospital. He was told that a lot of my records were damaged in a fire, but he managed to get a few sheets and at the back of one, someone had photocopied a blood bag, and it is my understanding, from that, it was able to be confirmed that I had indeed received infected blood which had given me the hepatitis C.
11. I was okay after the first liver transplant for around 6 months but then I began suffering from swelling in my stomach the doctors told me that this was ascites. My stomach would swell up as if I was heavily pregnant. I was told that it was caused by fluid gathering in the stomach. For the next 12-15 months I was going back and forth to hospital every couple of weeks. I would have to stay in and have the fluid drained. They would take up to 8 litres from my stomach. At a time and sometimes more. During this time of course I was

struggling to walk and found breathing very hard at times. I found sleeping was impossible most nights and struggled to eat meals and was very poorly.

12. I was told that the hepatitis C had attacked the new liver and that the only long term solution was to have yet another liver transplant. I was devastated at this news, there just never seemed to be an end to all my problems. My illness was putting a terrible strain on my family.

21. The problem though was that the hepatitis C had to be cleared up before I could have a new liver. The consultants at the Royal Victoria Hospital put me on a course of drugs called Interferon and Ribavirin which they hoped would clear the hepatitis. However these drugs had terrible side effects and my body could not handle them. As a result I was taken off the treatment.

22. I was offered a place on a trial being run at Kings Hospital London to be assessed for a drug to clear hepatitis C. I had to fly to Kings for a trial. There were only a handful of people doing this trial. However, I was required to travel to London at least twice a week or I would be removed from the trial. By this stage I was getting too weak to make the journey and therefore I was removed from the trial.

23. A short while later the Royal Hospital in Belfast said that they had funding for a different drug and they put me on that programme which would last 3 months. At first it made me very ill. It was a terrible 3 months whilst I underwent treatment of that drug. Its side effects made me forgetful and doing stupid things. It made me very anxious. It caused me to suffer a great deal of stress and anxiety. However, the drug began to work and it is my understanding that it cleared the hepatitis C sufficient enough for me to go forward to have the second liver transplant. The consultants have told me that they cannot guarantee that the hepatitis will not come back so I am constantly monitored just in case.

24. Things were further complicated now because I had developed two massive hernias which had me in constant pain. I was told that the doctors could not

fix these as it would make having a liver transplant much more difficult and that I would have to live with them until I had my second transplant when they would sort out the hernias at the same time. So I had to live with the hernias for over a year and I was in so much pain.

25. 2015 was a bad year, I was in and out of the Royal Victoria Hospital constantly, and I was admitted due to losing a lot of weight so quickly. The doctors fitted me with a feeding tube in my nose and then sent me home again. My husband took on the duties of feeding me throughout the nights.

26. In mid 2015 I once again became seriously ill and was re-admitted to the Royal Victoria where the decision was taken to move me by air ambulance to Kings Hospital London in the hope that a liver would become available. I was taken to Kings Hospital in London to wait for a new liver. I was in Kings for 8 weeks just lying there ill, separated from my family, getting weaker and weaker each day waiting for the new liver. I could feel myself losing the fight; I knew I was giving up but couldn't help myself. My husband who had been there with me kept me going.

27. The Consultant in Kings told my husband that he had more or less given up hope of obtaining a new liver for me and was going to send me home to be closer to my family. In other words I was not going to make it. I can recall flying back on the Tuesday of the week to the Royal Hospital Belfast. I had resigned myself to dying. I thought it was inevitable now.

28. However, in the early hours of Friday of that week, they suddenly told me they had found a match and I was flown back to Kings. There I had a transplant to receive the second liver. This was in 2015. I was told that I had a 13 hour operation, one of the longest on their records. It had been complicated by the hernias and tissue scarring.

29. Somehow I managed to come through this operation. I was in ITU for about a week and another few weeks in a ward at Kings. I then returned to the Royal

Hospital Belfast for a few weeks and then home. I must have been away 3 or 4 months in total.

30. I am grateful for all the work the doctors have done in giving me a new liver but my quality of life is still very limited. I feel very weak. I get tired and fatigued easily. I am constantly sick. I have gout in my fingers and legs which prevents me from doing the simplest of household tasks and prevents me from getting out and about without the help of my family.

31. For the past 18 months I have had a problem with a stricture in my bile duct. They require me to have stents put in to keep it open. I have been told that they do not want to keep doing this as it is going to cause long term problems. The doctors removed the last stent 3 months ago and they are not putting another one in. However, I have been told that the next time it blocks, I will need to be rushed to the Royal Victoria Hospital and a temporary stent put in and then flown to Kings Hospital in London to remove the bile duct which is a very serious invasive operation. The nerve ends in my feet have been damaged and I believe that might have been as a result of the lengthy operation I have had with the second liver transplant. I have back problems which I believe was caused when I was having the swelling in my stomach. I am on a heavy regime of drugs which I ensure I take.

32. I get very down and depressed because I thought that I would be able to get out and about and live a normal life. I am worried that I am a terrible burden on my family. I cannot enjoy an active family life. I have my two adult children and two grandchildren. The grandchildren are 7 and 4 years of age.

33. My husband has been very supportive, but it is as though he has had to put his life on hold to care for me. He retired as soon as he was able because I needed constant looking after.

34. There are some days when I feel reasonably okay but there are a lot of days when I wake up and feel terrible. When I am not feeling too bad, I can potter around the house and do light housework. I cannot though really go out

anywhere on my own; someone from the family has to be with me. My husband or my daughter Danielle will take me shopping. I have to pace myself when I do that, and make sure that I sit down regularly and do not over do it. I struggle to climb the stairs at home and have had several falls both in and outside the home.

35. I have missed a lot of family occasions, such as weddings and engagements. My son got married in 2009. At that time I was in hospital at the Royal. My son Russell said that he was prepared to cancel the wedding but that was the last thing I wanted. I managed to persuade the consultants at the hospital to let me go to the wedding. During the time I had been in hospital on that occasion, I lost a lot of weight, going down from a size 16 to a size 8. However I went to the wedding, it was a terrible struggle but I tried to put on a brave face for my son and the family.

36. I know that my daughter Danielle has struggled a lot because she has seen the worst of my illnesses.

37. There is a terrible stigma still about someone with hepatitis C. People think you are a carrier of some terrible disease. I know that Danielle suffered some bullying and taunting at school because of this. We as a family tend not to discuss my illness outside the home as people are still ignorant of the disease.

38. People also associated liver transplants with somebody who is an alcoholic. This is particularly at the forefront in Northern Ireland where the footballer George Best is something of a national hero. As well as being a great footballer, he is best remembered for being an alcoholic who had several liver transplants but eventually drank himself to death. Unfortunately that has done people like me no favours in that, anyone with liver problems, is immediately assumed to be an alcoholic like George Best. Also in the aftermath of his death the number of liver donations dropped.

39. My son Russell seems to have bottled up what happened to me and has tried to almost ignore it. He will change the subject and not want to discuss my problems with me when we speak. As if to say that if we don't talk about it, it didn't happen.

6. Treatment/Care Support

1. Dr Calendar had been helpful and supportive when he told me about the infection, but that really has been the extent of any help or assistance anybody has ever given me. I am grateful for the fact some payments were made by the Skipton Fund but they provided no further support, it was simply "here's some money, get on with it".
2. I have struggled physically with my illness and as a result have missed out on treatment which could only be provided in England as I was too weak to travel. I have never been offered counselling or psychological support.

7. Financial Assistance

1. We made an application to the Skipton Fund. In due course I received £25,000 payment for hepatitis C and a further £25,000 payment for having to have undergone the liver transplant.

8. Other Issues

1. I was a healthy young woman, a newly married new mother when, unknown to me, I was infected with contaminated blood. Although I was not aware of it at the time, and it did not impact me straight away, it ultimately has left me as an invalid and a burden on my family for most of my adult life. I will never know what it is like to lead a normal healthy life as a wife, mother and grandmother. Although I am the way I am at the moment I thank God and the two donors who gave me two chances at life and I pray for them and their families every day.

Statement of Truth

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

Signed. **GRO-C**

Dated... 26 / 2 / 2019,