

Witness Name: Lord Philip Alexander Hunt

Statement No.: [WITN4680001]

Exhibits: [WITN4680002 –

WITN4680007]

Dated: 13.09.2020

INFECTED BLOOD INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF LORD HUNT

I, Philip Hunt, will say as follows: -

Section 1: Introduction

1. My name is Lord Philip Alexander Hunt. I was born on GRO-C 1949. My address has been made available to the Inquiry.
2. My career before entering Parliament was in health administration and I am a former Chief Executive of the NHS Confederation.
3. I have been a Labour Peer in the House of Lords since 1997. I served as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health in the Lords from July 1999 to March 2003. I was Minister of State for National Health Services Reform from January to June 2007. I was Deputy Leader of the House of Lords and Minister of State at the Department of Energy and Climate Change from 2008 to 2010. I also served as a Minister in the Department of Work and Pensions, Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and the Ministry of Justice. I was a Lords spokesperson for Health, and later Health and Social Care, from September 2012 until May 2018.

Section 2: Witness statement of Lord Owen

4. The Inquiry has provided me with a copy of the witness statement of Lord Owen, dated 5 February 2020. At paragraph 52 of his statement, Lord Owen refers to a letter from me to Lord Morris, dated 12 November 2001 [LDOW0000173_002]. He is critical of the penultimate paragraph of that letter, which reads as follows:

“If the UK had achieved self sufficiency on [sic] the 1970s as Lord Owen intended blood products would still have transmitted hepatitis C, because the virus was in the donor population and as you know the technology to treat pooled plasma was not available until 1985.”

5. Lord Owen makes the point that there was, in the 1970s, a greater risk of infection from imported blood products made from donations from paid donors; and that whilst the voluntary donor system in the UK, with the screening procedures employed by the Blood Transfusion Service, could not exclude all risk, *“it would help to alleviate the risk of a particular blood pool being contaminated”*. Lord Owen also refers to the risk of contamination of blood pools increasing with the number of donors contributing to a particular pool, *“with or without screening questions”*.
6. I am grateful for the Inquiry providing me with an opportunity to address Lord Owen’s comments. At the time of preparing this statement however, I understand that the process of disclosure of records between the Department of Health and Social Care (“DHSC”) and the Inquiry is not complete. Whilst some searches have been carried out for material relevant to the criticism set out above, I understand that there may be further relevant records. I have done my best to address Lord Owen’s comments from a combination of my memory and the documents that are currently available to me. However, my letter to Lord Morris was sent nearly 19 years ago. I would, therefore, like to stress that I may need to provide a further statement once all the relevant records have been collated.

Section 3: The background to my letter to Lord Morris of 12 November 2001

7. Lord Morris wrote to the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, on 22 August 2001 [WITN4680002] in his capacity as President of the Haemophilia Society, to put the following question on behalf of the Society's membership:

"Whether the departmental inquiry initiated by Frank Dobson, when he was Health Secretary, into the infection of Haemophilia patients with hepatitis C by contaminated NHS blood products, was aware of Lord (David) Owen's budgeted commitment, announced in Parliament when he was a Health Minister in 1975, that within 18 months the UK would no longer need to import blood products from countries using paid donors; and if the Prime Minister will ask Alan Milburn now to review the Dobson Inquiry's findings in light of Lord Owen's recent public statements about the commitment he gave."

8. Lord Morris enclosed a copy of an article that appeared in the *Newcastle Journal* on 2 August 2001, which contained the public statements made by Lord Owen.
9. On 28 August 2001, 10 Downing Street sent Lord Morris' letter of 22 August 2001 to the Department of Health and requested that a Minister in the Department reply to Lord Morris [WITN4680003].
10. On 9 October 2001, an email was sent by Robert Finch, a Departmental official in the Health Services Division, to a number of recipients, including my Private Secretary, Emma De Zoete [WITN4680004]. This email attached a draft reply to a Parliamentary question from Lord Morris, PQ 1141 and a covering note for my attention [WITN4680005] from Jill Taylor, an official from one of the Public Health teams within the Department.
11. The covering note related both to this Parliamentary question from Lord Morris and to Lord Morris' letter to the Prime Minister of 22 August 2001:

"1. This PQ from Lord Morris is about the call for a public inquiry by the Haemophilia Society into the infection of haemophiliacs with hepatitis C

from infected blood products and is almost certainly as a result of statements made by Lord Owen to the media in August.

2. Lord Owen stated in a newspaper article and in a BBC R4 "Face the Facts" programme that when he was Health Minister in 1975 he had made a public commitment that within 18 months the UK would no longer need to import blood products from countries (such as the USA) which use paid donors and that several million pounds was to be set aside to build a new blood products processing laboratory at Elstree.

3. Lord Owen is making the point that if the UK had been self-sufficient in the 1970s and had stopped importing blood products then the infection of haemophiliacs with hepatitis C would not have occurred to the extent that it did.

4. As President of the Haemophilia Society, Lord Morris wrote to the Prime Minister on 22 August (a copy of his letter and the relevant newspaper article containing Lord Owen's public statement is attached) having been asked by the Haemophilia Society, for a Government response to the statements made by Lord Owen. The reply, for DH Ministers response, has not yet been sent, as we have been establishing the facts about what happened at the time.

5. We have now done this and have included a separate comprehensive background note with bull points on the self-sufficiency issue in this briefing pack, together with supplementary replies to the follow up questions from Lord Morris (or Lord Owen). A draft response to the letter from Lord Morris will follow."

12. The comprehensive background note with bullet points on the self-sufficiency referred to in this covering note [WITN4680006] ran to 26 pages.
13. My reply to PQ 1141 from Lord Morris was given on 15 October 2001 [WITN4680007] and I dealt with a number of supplementary questions from

Lord Morris and other Peers. I note that my reply to Lord Morris' supplementary question included the following sentence:

“Even if that was achieved in the late 1970s, the fact that the heat treatment did not take place until the mid-1980s meant that self-sufficiency would not have prevented haemophiliacs being infected with hepatitis C.”

Section 4: My reply to PQ 1141 on 15 October 2001 and my letter to Lord Morris of 12 November 2001

14. In preparing for oral questions in the Lords, it was always my practice to meet officials to discuss the subject matter and proposed reply, to ask for further information and to meet them again immediately before the question was to be answered. I would therefore have ensured that I had all available information before providing any substantive answer to PQ 1141. I would, however, have been reliant on my officials for provision of this information, particularly as PQ 1141 related to events that had occurred over 20 years prior to the time I was answering the question.
15. I can see from Jill Taylor's covering note of 9 October 2001 that I was to be provided with a draft response to the letter from Lord Morris of 22 August 2001 by my officials. Whilst searches for relevant material have not to date located this draft response or the covering correspondence, it would have been standard practice for a draft response to have been provided to me in this way by Departmental officials, particularly when the subject matter of the correspondence was historical and I had no direct knowledge of the events in question.
16. While I was Parliamentary Under-Secretary State for Health in the Lords, I replied to a large volume of correspondence from MPs and Peers on a weekly basis. Letters would often come to me ready to sign, but I reviewed these carefully and in every bundle of correspondence sent for me, which could contain dozens of letters, I invariably sent some back for re-drafting. As such, whilst I do not, nearly 19 years later, specifically recall my thinking at the time,

I can only assume that I was content with the letter to Lord Morris, as sent on 12 November 2001.

17. I would like to take this opportunity, however, to accept that I ought, in my reply on 15 October 2001 to PQ 1141 and in my letter to Lord Morris of 12 November 2001, to have acknowledged that, while the attainment of self-sufficiency in the late 1970s would not have prevented the transmission of Hepatitis C to haemophiliacs in the UK altogether, it may have meant that the relative risk to haemophiliacs was lower. I appreciate that the question of the scale of the relative risk and consequent impact on haemophiliacs are issues that the Inquiry will be investigating.

Statement of Truth

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

Signed

GRO-C: Philip A Hunt

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Dated

13 / 9 / 2020