

Witness Name: Russell Cromie

Statement No. WITN2430001

Dated: 24th February 2019

INFECTED BLOOD INQUIRY

FIRST WRITTEN STATEMENT OF RUSSELL CROMIE

I provide this statement in response to a request under Rule 9 of the Inquiry rules 2006 dated 12th December 2018. I adopt the paragraph numbering in the Rule 9 request for ease of reference.

I, Russell Cromie will say as follows:-

1. Introduction

1. My name is Russell Cromie. My date of birth is GRO-C 1957 and my address is known to the Inquiry. I live with my wife Marie. We were married in 1980. I am retired and a former Royal Marine Commando. I have a son Russell, and a daughter Danielle.

2. How Affected

1. Around 2005 my wife Marie who was working as a school crossing patrol lady, complained of feeling unwell. This was unusual as she had always been fairly healthy. She was complaining of severe tiredness

and pain in her legs, and that she found standing very difficult. After a visit to her General Practitioner (GP) Doctor White, of Finaghy Health Centre, 13-25 Finaghy Road South Belfast BT10 OBX, my wife was sent to the casualty department of the Belfast City Hospital, where blood samples were taken from her and she was referred onward to a consultant Gastroenterologist, Mr Johnston, also in the Belfast City Hospital. I was with my wife when Mr Johnston informed her that she had Hepatitis C. He asked my wife if she had slept around, or if she had any tattoos. I was shocked at his attitude and his manner and was very angry. My wife answered him in the negative and I knew that my wife was very embarrassed.

2. We were both extremely shocked at the news and I think it is fair to say that we were devastated.
3. My wife was then referred to a liver specialist Doctor Callender at the Royal Victoria Hospital Belfast. At that appointment my wife was told that she developed sclerosis of the liver. Until that point I believed that sclerosis was brought about by heavy drinking, even though I knew my wife had never drunk. I was stunned by this news, and thought to myself 'what else can go wrong?'
4. Then in 2005 I was attending a meeting when I received a frantic phone call from my son informing me that my wife had been rushed to the Royal Victoria Hospital Belfast and that she was bleeding very badly. I was informed that my wife had been vomiting blood at home and was to be admitted for observation that night.
5. I returned to the hospital to the ward where my wife was the next day, to the sight of blood all over the floor, and a team of doctors around her bed trying to stop her choking and bleeding to death. The crash team arrived and she was rushed off to surgery. This was all going on in

front of me and I believed I was watching my wife dying. I waited outside the theatre for hours waiting to hear if the doctors had saved her life. This was up until then the worst time of my life. The Consultant told me that if she had another bleed within the following 12 hours that they may not be able to save her, we prayed a lot that night.

6. My wife was taken to ICU and my children were allowed to visit although my wife was sedated. My daughter broke down and ran out from the room, whilst my son held his mother's hand but was very upset by the fact that my wife's eyes were taped shut for the operation. This image has stayed with my son who to this day can't bring himself to talk about my wife's illness. This had a devastating effect on me as I had to console and explain all to my children, whilst trying to remain unaffected by what I had been through and be strong for them and the wider family.
7. When my wife was well enough she was transferred to a ward where she was told that the veins in the throat and chest had burst and that this was a direct result of the Hepatitis C. Her liver was also badly damaged and that the only cure was a liver transplant.
8. Our world was falling apart every day there seemed to be another health problem that we would have to deal with, and it seemed that we were all alone ("this is your lot so get on with it") during this entire time. Neither my children or myself were offered any type of counselling or advice.
9. I watched as my wife's health got gradually worse, she was getting to the point where she would be too ill to go through a transplant. She confided in me that she believed that she would die and started to make plans in the event of her death. After all the planning thankfully she received her transplant just in time in 2007 in Kings College Hospital London. After 3 weeks in hospital my wife was transferred to

the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast where she remained for another 4 weeks before she was well enough to go home. She had been told by her consultant that her old liver had been cancerous and that they had got it just in time.

10. It was suggested by my wife's Consultant Doctor Callender that we should try and obtain any records of blood transfusions which my wife may have had in the past. My wife had received blood transfusions in 1981 after the birth of our son, in Craigavon Area Hospital. I made arrangements to pay for and obtain her medical records of that period in hospital.

11. Her records consisted of 5-6 A4 pages of scribbled notes, none of which contained any record of her having received blood transfusions, or blood products. However there was a photocopy of an empty blood transfusion/blood product bag in among the notes. I asked where the rest of her notes were as she had been in hospital for several weeks, and had several blood transfusions during that time. I was told that they must have been destroyed.

3. Other Infections

1. My delight at my wife's recovery was short lived, around 6 months after the transplant my wife began to feel unwell again. She developed a very swollen stomach and was admitted to the Royal Victoria Hospital. The swelling was ascites the gathering of fluid in her stomach. For 15 months she would be admitted every couple of weeks to have between 8-10 litres of fluid drained from her stomach by inserting a huge needle into her body. Seeing this happening to her was extremely hard to watch as I could see how much pain she was in but could do nothing to help her. She found walking a struggle and breathing was hard for her, sleeping was almost impossible. I had to

help her get up and down to the toilet, to wash, and walk any distance. She found eating meals a struggle as well and began to lose weight and became very poorly.

2. We received the news from the Doctors that the Hepatitis C was back with a vengeance and had attacked her new liver, and that in the long term she would require another liver transplant. My world caved in I felt so alone and helpless, I couldn't believe how unfair this whole situation had become. There seemed to be no end to the problems and complications, every day seemed to throw a new curve ball.

4. Consent

1. A liver function test was carried out on my wife in November 1981 at the request of my wife's GP, Dr **GRO-D** who had a surgery on Tynon Village Armagh (which no longer exists). This test was carried out without my wife's knowledge or consent. She was never informed of the results of this test nor was she given adequate or full information as to its results or impact. My wife and I only became aware of this test when we received copies of her medical records.

5. Impact

1. My wife's illness was diagnosed in 2004 and came as a complete shock too us both. She has what can only be described as several very close calls medically, and this has taken its toll not only on her but myself as well, both physically and mentally. Whilst I have never been treated for stress, I have certainly felt an immense amount of stress throughout the entire period of her illness and treatment which is still ongoing to this day.
2. At the time of my wife's diagnosis I was employed, but due to her illness and in the aftermath of her first transplant I was forced to avail of early retirement to care for my wife who was struggling to cope with

her ongoing illness. The constant travelling to and from hospitals in Belfast and London soon took its toll on my finances with any savings mostly used, which caused more worry and stress about how we were going to cope financially.

3. I found myself constantly trying to maintain a normal balanced home life with the frequent admissions to hospital for my wife, and her long periods of illness restricting her to care in our home. Trying to keep her moral up whilst trying to do normal everyday things like help my son organise his wedding, (which he and I and even the doctors thought she would not be able to attend) was very difficult.
4. A social life for me became a thing of the past, my hobbies and pastimes just stopped as my wife took priority. This led to long periods of inactivity on my part which has taken its toll on my health. Before my wife was diagnosed I enjoyed an active life with many interests which kept me fit.
5. My wife's illness is as a result of someone else's neglect and through no fault of her own, but we as a family have had to pay a very high price for that neglect.
12. Normal life ceased to exist for us as a family in 2004. I often think how good it would be to have a good holiday, but due in part to my wife's ongoing treatment and constant hospital appointments and the unbelievable costs of travel insurance, that is impossible.
13. I have witnessed first-hand what a terrible disease Hepatitis C is, how it can effect lives and eventually destroy lives. The toll that it takes on the sufferer and those around them is shocking. For me what makes the situation worse is that my wife's suffering and pain and my trauma and that of my family could have been avoided. During this time there

are several words I have used on a regular basis when discussing the situation that I found myself in with my wife. Anger, disgust, sorrow, hatred, hopelessness, thanks, admiration, hope, and most important of all is love. Thanks and admiration to the doctors and nursing staff who showed so much kindness to my wife and me and continue to do so, and love and thanks to the individuals and their families who made the decision to donate the livers that saved my wife's life.

6. Treatment/Care Support

1. The situation was further complicated by the fact that Kings College Hospital stated that the Hepatitis C had to clear before they would consider another transplant.
2. To that end they wanted my wife to start on a drug trial in the hope of clearing the virus, and required my wife to travel to London at least twice a week for this new drug.
3. I could see that my wife was so weakened by the virus that this travel was impossible for her to undertake, and we were informed that she would be removed from the trial. Yet again the chance to be cured of this virus was taken away from her and I had resigned myself to the fact that my wife would die because she was too weak to travel. I was probably at my lowest point at this stage as everything and everyone seemed to be conspiring against her.
4. My wife's consultant Dr McDougall informed my wife that there was a new anti-hepatitis drug which he fought to get for my wife. At the end of 2014 my wife was started on the new drug which had an immediate effect and after 12 weeks of treatment the hepatitis was gone. She was also suffering with two massive hernias which were as a result of the fluid which had been gathering in her stomach, but was told that

there was nothing that could be done before a new liver transplant, she was in so much pain.

5. In 2015 I watched as my wife started to lose a substantial amount of weight and was then admitted to hospital. She was fitted with a feeding tube in her nose and sent back home where I took on the job of feeding my wife and sitting by her bed in the early hours unblocking the tube or laying it out straight when the alarm went off because it had kinked. This went on for weeks and was exhausting for me. My wife continued to go downhill and was readmitted to hospital and eventually flown by Air ambulance to Kings College Hospital in the hope that a new liver would be found.
6. For 8 weeks I sat with my wife and watched her getting weaker and weaker she was just skin and bone at this stage. The Professor in charge told me that they were sending my wife home as there seemed to be no hope of getting a new liver for her, and that it was best that she be with her family. In other words she was going to die.
7. I was just numb at this point, trying to reassure my wife telling the family that it was just better that she waited at home for the new liver than in London, all the time knowing that our time was extremely limited whilst acting as normal as possible.
8. We arrived back home to the Royal Victoria Hospital late on a Tuesday evening but were very quickly flown back to London on the Friday of the same week as a suitable liver had been found. This was the miracle we had prayed for she received her new liver and entered the recovery stage. She was in a lot of pain but everything seemed to be working as it should be we returned to hospital in Belfast after 3 weeks where she remained for a further 3 weeks before being released home.

My wife still has very serious issues and will need to undergo further surgery in the future but at least she is still with us.

7. **Financial Assistance**

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

8. **Other Issues**

1. I have no further comment to make.

Statement of Truth

I believe GRO-C and this witness statement are true.

Signed.....

Dated..... 24/2/2019.....