

The Infected Blood Inquiry weekly summary

The
Haemophilia
Society

A summary of inquiry hearings: week of 24 January 2022

Dr Bill Wagstaff, director of Sheffield Regional Transfusion Centre, 1974 to 1995, had a career which started in the 1950s, before any treatment was available for haemophilia. He administered the first dose of cryoprecipitate in his region and described meetings with clinicians in the 80s when he tried to persuade them to use more of this 'safer' product.

Dr Brian McLelland, director of Edinburgh and SE Scotland Blood Transfusion Service, 1979 to 1995, stopped collecting blood from prisoners in 1981, but it continued elsewhere until 1984. A 'huge' amount of Dr McClelland's time in the early 80s was spent trying to improve the service's 'grossly deficient' facilities.

Donor questionnaires from 1983 showed that people in the Edinburgh region with a history of intravenous drug use were not yet permanently excluded. He said self-sufficiency of blood products in Scotland led to an 'optimistic belief' that HIV might be avoided. It was a 'terrific shock' when Scottish-made factor was found to transmit HIV in late 1984.

Inquiry focus: Identification of hepatitis C in 1988

In 1988 Chiron announced that its scientists had cloned and identified a portion of the hepatitis C genome. Witness Prof John Barbara, head of microbiology at North London Regional Transfusion Service, greeted the news with 'joy' because he believed that it would now be possible to 'get a handle' on this 'elusive' condition. But it would be another year before the research was published simultaneously with a patent. Inquiry chair, Sir Brian Langstaff, asked if this delay was to ensure that Chiron's test could be 'sold around the world'. Prof Barbara said this played a 'considerable part' in the hold up, and that when it appeared, the patent was 'rock solid' which blocked anyone from doing research which wasn't based on that clone. Prof Barbara said the resulting Ortho test cost four times as much as other routine screening tests in the UK.

Quotes of the week

'We did use our best endeavours to try and persuade them [haemophilia clinicians] that we could have been more comfortable with a greater use of cryoprecipitate or certainly a way of finding less use of American imports, but they just wanted to carry on pretty much as they were...'

Dr Bill Wagstaff

'The concept had been for many years that hepatitis was, in the main, a disease from which people recover, and that concept, I think, stayed in most people's thoughts for quite a long time.'

Dr Wagstaff on prevailing attitudes to hepatitis until 1976.

'He phoned me...to say that they'd heard that two [straight] haemophilia patients had developed AIDS... and the chill realisation that this was a virus and, as such, would have been transmissible by blood and even by fractionated products...'

Prof John Barbara on realising in 1982 how AIDS was transmitted.

'The haemophilia clinicians were very capable people who read the literature just the same as we did, so they certainly knew about these risks and we certainly pointed them out as a concern.'

Dr Brian McLelland