

The Infected Blood Public Inquiry NEWSLETTER



THE
HAEMOPHILIA
SOCIETY

A summary of inquiry hearings from London

The Infected Blood Inquiry resumed this week with a very different feel, thanks to new social distancing rules.

Inquiry chair, Sir Brian Langstaff, said staff had been working “full on” through lockdown to keep the investigation timetable on track.

Lord David Owen, health minister 1974-76, now aged 82, was the first witness. He said it was as a medical student in Greece that he first formed his view that paid-for blood donations were “dangerous”. He said in the early 1970s he was aware of the risks of infections passed on through pooled blood products. He said: “I

don't believe that any doctor in the country had not become aware of it.”

He described his push for UK self-sufficiency in blood products, allocating £500,000 for the project in 1975. Yet it did not happen, despite pledges from his successors to continue the project.

Lord Owen later discovered his private ministerial papers from that period had been destroyed.

He said politicians had to admit when something had gone wrong and have a “post mortem”.

Next came a chronological and historical overview of material relevant to the knowledge of risk

of infection from blood and blood products, presented by Jenni Richards QC.

Research showing jaundice developing following the use of human serum was shown to date back to 1885 in the UK. As well as charting the awareness and eventual identification of hepatitis C, Ms Richards presented a detailed chronology of the emergence of AIDS/HIV and the advice given by health professionals from 1981 onwards.

On Thursday, she started to examine the role of Professor Arthur Bloom at the Cardiff Haemophilia Centre. This will continue at the next hearing on 30 September.

Inquiry news— socially distanced hearings

This week was the first opportunity to see the measures the inquiry has had to take to achieve socially distanced hearings. Everyone entering Fleetbank House is required to use hand sanitiser on entry and wear a mask. The hearings room had a greatly reduced capacity with chairs set out in pairs or by themselves for participants. Each person was allocated a specific seat. A scattering of lawyers were spaced out desks behind Jenni Richards QC, counsel to the inquiry. Only Ms Richards did not wear a mask. Participants were allocated a set place to sit at break times and their food and drink was brought to their table. One unfortunate consequence of the Covid-19 restrictions is that Sir Brian can no longer mingle with people attending the inquiry. He now takes his breaks separately in another room.

Quotes of the week

“Your being here in the numbers that you are, despite the perils of the pandemic, tells a story...It says you have chosen to be here rather than keeping strictly to yourselves safely at home, because you see this as really valuable.”

Sir Brian pays tribute to those attending the hearings this week

“We have to face up to it. I did not achieve self sufficiency... I deeply regret that. We were warned, and the facts were out there.”

Lord David Owen

“It would seem to me a great pity if we cannot make our own material in this country for lack of the organisation, apparatus and buildings in which to work.”

Dr Rosemary Biggs calling for self-sufficiency in 1967

“I have ..come to the conclusion that all blood products made from blood donated in the USA after 1978 should be withdrawn.”

Dr Galbraith, director of Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre for England & Wales , May 1983