



Fight for justice

'We want the truth'

After what Labour peer Lord Robert Winston has described as 'the worst treatment disaster in the history of the NHS' a group of campaigning widows have finally won their fight for a public inquiry

By Suzanne Dixon

Every day Harriet Bullock pictures her husband Ken, propped up by pillows in his hospital bed, too ill to move or even speak. His last goodbye to the wife he'd loved for 25 years was just a final squeeze of her hand, because no words would come. It's an image that haunts the 72-year-old in her fight to discover why her husband died and to win compensation.

And Harriet isn't alone – more than 200 other widows in Britain are in a similar situation. All were married to men with haemophilia who were given blood contaminated by the hepatitis C virus. If their deaths weren't tragic enough, in another cruel twist they have also been denied government compensation. "Money can never compensate but it does acknowledge that someone, somewhere did something dreadful and that grieving

relatives are suffering because of this," says Harriet.

The men all died before August 2003, the official cut-off date for compensation payments. If they had died after that date from Hepatitis C or from an HIV-related illness contracted in the same way, their families would have received financial support. Ken died in October 1998. Since then Harriet has fought for recognition, along with the other widows who were left with nothing. "I was fortunate in that I could move to a smaller house and somehow I manage, but other wives really struggle to make ends meet. Every time I think we won't win, I remember him in hospital and then being buried, and I fight on," says the Suffolk campaigner.

More than 4,800 haemophiliacs were infected with hepatitis C in Britain from transfusions in the Eighties and early Nineties. More than 1,700 have since died and many more are terminally ill and need constant care.

After years of campaigning, the 'hep C widows' have now won their fight for an independent public inquiry into the supply of contaminated blood to haemophiliacs and calls for compensation. The inquiry, organised by

Harriet Bullock, whose husband died from Hepatitis C contracted from contaminated blood products

members of the House of Lords led by Lord Morris of Manchester, will be held in the Houses of Parliament next month.

"We hope that the justice will be finally be done, and the Government will see how unfair its actions have been," says Harriet.

Other sufferers have joined the fight, too. Fred Bates, 58, from Manchester, also has hepatitis C after becoming infected in 1983 or 1984. Fred's wife Eleanor, 52, says: "At the moment Fred's health is steady, but he's not able to do very much. We don't really have a life. We exist, because we can't really do anything. When I wake up I'm frightened it might be the day he starts to go downhill. I don't plan for the future, because I have no idea what it holds."

Lord Morris, President of the Haemophilia Society, says: "It is a gross anomaly that widows of those infected with hepatitis C are excluded. It illustrates the piecemeal way this tragedy has been dealt with," he says.

A Department of Health spokesman said: "We have great sympathy for those infected with hepatitis C and HIV."

The spokesman also said that the Government of the day had acted in good faith and they didn't feel a public inquiry would provide any real benefit for those affected.

'Someone somewhere did something dreadful'

