

Gary takes blood justice fight online

When Gary Kelly finished his treatment for cancer he hoped his health problems were coming to an end: they were just beginning.

Gary - of Cartside Street in Langside - is one of around 5,000 people across the UK who have become ill as a result of being given contaminated blood products by the NHS.

He's launched an online petition at the 10 Downing Street website, calling for Prime Minister Gordon Brown to order a full independent public inquiry.

Recently Scottish Health Secretary Nicola Sturgeon said she was going to organise an inquiry into what happened north of the border.

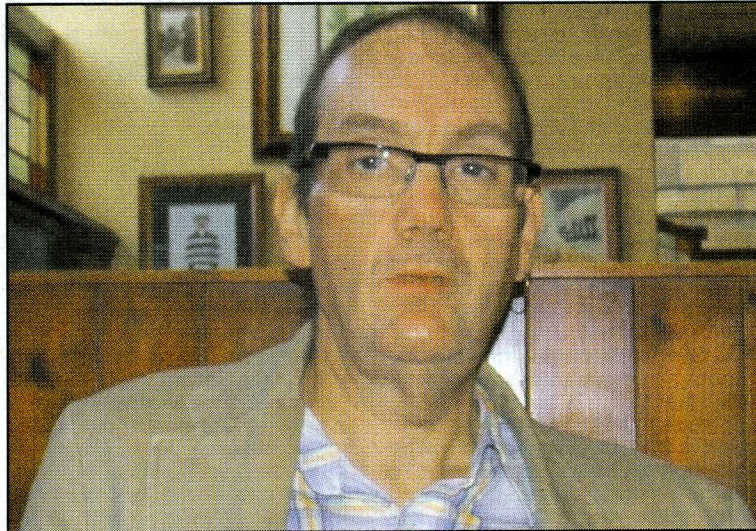
Gary said: "I was suffering from leukaemia and I didn't think I'd survive. Everyone I'd heard of who'd had leukaemia had died. I was taken into Glasgow Royal Infirmary for a bone marrow transplant in 1986 after my sister agreed to donate her bone marrow so that I could be treated."

At the time, the chances of surviving leukaemia were very low, but the operation was a success and saved Gary's life. Feeling he had been given a second chance, he began to make plans for the future.

What he didn't know was that during the procedure he had been given a contaminated blood transfusion that infected him with HIV.

"I wasn't told until December of that year, three months after the blood transfusion service and the hospital knew what had happened," he said. "I was devastated."

It's sometimes hard to remember the stigma that was attached to HIV/Aids during the 1980s. Some people had dubbed Aids a



Gary Kelly wants justice for people infected with contaminated blood products

'gay plague' - a punishment from God for a sinful lifestyle. The spread of the infection was also associated with drug abusers who got little sympathy in the media.

When it finally became clear that hundreds of haemophiliacs and other NHS patients had been infected with HIV and Hepatitis C through contaminated blood transfusions, the media began to take up their case.

Gary was far from pleased with their reporting.

"I objected strongly to the way the papers dealt with the question," he says. "They portrayed us as the 'innocent victims'. That implied that the other sufferers were somehow guilty. A number of us let them know what we thought and the language began to change."

Gary has suffered serious health and other problems for the last 20 years. He's had two

heart attacks and been infected with pneumonia. Nowadays, he says his health is up and down and that he has to take each day as it comes.

He hasn't been able to work and he's often been short of money. Ironically, before going in for the operation he had been working with people with chronic illnesses and disabilities, interviewing them for the the Social Work department to determine what services they required.

He's had to face unavoidable personal difficulties. He was only in his early 20s when he was infected and hasn't been able to form a relationship.

"One of the worst aspects of this scandal is that the medical authorities didn't even tell a lot of people they were infected.

"One young guy was only 17. He had an active sex life but hadn't been told he was HIV pos-

itive. Other victims infected their partners because the authorities didn't tell them even after they knew."

He is very angry about that: "A whole number of people have been prosecuted for deliberately infecting others with HIV through unprotected sex. Why have medical authorities that failed to tell people they were infected not been prosecuted?"

Gary received very little support after his diagnosis. He thinks that there was not very much the Royal Infirmary could do, as it was not an area in which they had any expertise. But he was never referred to a service that could offer him proper advice and counselling. He says he was more or less left on his own to get on with it.

Through a friend he eventually heard that a consultant at Ruchill hospital had a good reputation and he got himself referred.

"He was great," says Gary. "I stayed with him until he retired in April this year."

His new consultant refused to put him on AZT - one of the first drugs to treat HIV. One of the side effects was that it could harm the bone marrow and, with Gary's medical history, his doctor felt that the risk was too great. In retrospect, Gary feels it was just as well because the original courses of treatment were much too high and poisoned the system. Many patients died.

Later on he was put on a more appropriate anti-viral treatment, but there have still been serious side effects.

"Many of the medical problems I have now have been caused by my treatment," he explains. "My pancreas has been damaged and that means that I

have to take additional medication every time I eat since one of the functions of the pancreas is to produce enzymes that break down food."

He has lost most of his natural body fat. It's not just that his weight has come down dramatically, he's lost the fat even on the soles of his feet so that he has to wear special shoe supports that let him walk.

The aim of his present anti-viral treatment is to keep the virus to an undetectable level within his system. So far it has been successful. But Gary is all too aware that he has been left with an incurable infection and he wants something done about it.

He and other sufferers say they have detected a different tone, including more sympathetic language, from Government since Gordon Brown became Prime Minister, but that it's not enough.

"Australia, Canada, Ireland and New Zealand have all held public inquiries into contaminated blood transfusions and awarded compensation," he says. "In Ireland they have made ex gratia payments of £1 million for each infection, with incremental payments depending on how ill individuals have become. We want a similar approach here."

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You can sign Gary's petition online at:
<http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/PublicInquiry/>