

Widow wants more care taken with blood supply

By PAMELA COWAN
Leader-Post

Justice, not jail, is what a Regina woman is hoping for since police laid charges Wednesday in the national tainted-blood scandal.

The RCMP Blood Task Force laid criminal charges against four doctors, an American pharmaceutical company and the Canadian Red Cross more than two decades after thousands were infected with tainted blood.

"I can't say that I want to see these men go to jail, but I want to see the government and the blood agency be more careful and have more integrity," said Betty Lou Felsing.

Betty Lou's 42-year-old husband Peter died in June, 1998. His 38-year-old brother Thomas died in July, 2000. Both hemophiliacs contracted HIV and hepatitis C after receiving tainted blood, she said.

The Felsing learned Peter was sick when he was declined life insurance in 1986 after routine blood tests. He appeared healthy until the early 1990s when complications led to many hospital stays. He had to quit work in April 1997.

While battling ill health, Peter fought for accountability from those in charge of Canada's blood supply.

"He was a big player on the team that negotiated compensation with the province of Saskatchewan, he was a member of the AIDS Advisory committee here in Saskatchewan, he was a member of the national Hemophilia Society board and as he saw his friends dying and their children left behind, he even became more adamant that this message had to get out and people had to know what happened," Betty Lou said.

Peter and Thomas had a mild form of hemophilia, but they lacked Factor 8 — the clotting factor made from the pooled plasma of a large number of blood donors. Peter required the factor to control nosebleeds, which surgery later corrected.

However, the damage was done.

"The subject of HIV and AIDS was so taboo that we lived with this for probably five years before we mentioned to anybody what our situation was for fear of rejection from people and fear for his job," Betty Lou said. "When we finally did start to tell people about his condition, we had nothing but support."

The decision to disclose Peter's condition wasn't made lightly and was prompted when Nikolaus, the couple's son, started school. The Felsing didn't want Nikolaus to think he or his parents had done anything wrong.

Peter was frustrated many recommendations in Justice Horace Krever's report on Canada's blood system, published in 1997, weren't implemented. Following the Krever Commission, the RCMP Blood Task Force was created to launch a full-scale criminal investigation into Canada's blood distribution system.

"Peter was happy that the investigation was going on, but felt that it was taking way too much time and people who were living with it didn't have time. By 1997-98, so many hemophiliacs in Saskatchewan had passed away. He was angry."

Peter and Thomas were compensated, but money can't replace a life, Betty Lou said.

"My son is now growing up without a father and I wonder how much he will remember of his dad because he was so young when his dad died, and that makes me sad."

The Canadian Blood Services was created to take over blood donations and manage Canada's blood supply.

Now prospective donors must answer in-depth questions before they can give blood. Betty Lou feels this system is safer.

"Although questions may feel invasive, they are important questions to be asked to protect others and I hope the blood agency never gets away from asking those tough questions."

QUOTABLE

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Betty Lou Felsing

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