

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **The Poison Line: Life and Death in the Infected Blood Scandal** *by Cara McGoogan*

Hardback, 416 pages  
Viking, September 2023

In this book, journalist Cara McGoogan foreshadows by some months the final report of the UK public inquiry that finally revealed how haemophilia victims in the UK were exposed to hepatitis C and HIV/Aids through contaminated blood product transfusions. Many of them, also sometimes their partners, died as a result.

Licensed in the US in 1969, Factor VIII protein from plasma initially revolutionised the treatment of haemophilia. Britain, among other countries, did not have enough of its own blood products to meet its needs, and so imported Factor VIII, mostly from the United States. US pharmaceutical companies paid for blood donations, and donors included prisoners, drug addicts and sex workers. By the early 1980s, the risk of the transmission of hepatitis B and C and soon the HIV virus had been recognised but it did not result in real change until after many people had been exposed and infected. According to the final report of the independent inquiry under Sir Brian Langstaff, published in May 2024, around 1,250 people in the UK with bleeding disorders were infected with HIV, including 380 children. Almost all of them were also infected with Hepatitis C and some with Hepatitis B and Hepatitis D as well. Three quarters of these adults and children have died.

McGoogan approaches the story from multiple angles, starting with a revelation to US lawyer Tom Mull at a state penitentiary in Louisiana. After this short prologue, she divides the text in two parts each of seven chapters, mainly focussing on the UK: The Fall and The Truth. Her aim is to tell how the story unfolded and most of all its impact on people and families who suffered. She does so vividly and comprehensively. We learn about the events, why the treatments and experiments continued, and the motives of those involved, especially the pharmaceutical companies and the health establishment. She describes the tenacious efforts by victims and some lawyers, journalists and a few politicians to get an open explanation and compensation for the victims, and the efforts to stymie them.

This is a journalist's book. Her sources include many interviews she conducted personally, as well as official reports and media coverage. These give her an advantage over many medical historians who rarely have the opportunity to interrogate the people they are writing about. One drawback is that the narrative moves back and forth in time over more than 40 years, so a chronology of key dates would be helpful. This book will interest any reader who wants to know more about what happened in the infected blood scandal and why. For historians generally, it will extend their knowledge and analysis of this and parallels with other long delayed reckonings with injustice.

**Lee Coppack**  
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