

Witness Statement Ref. No. 088/1

**INQUIRY INTO HYPONATRAEMIA-RELATED DEATHS**

**Name:** Colm Shannon

**Title:** Deputy Director of Communications for the Executive Information Service.

**Present position and department/employer:** Deputy Director of Communications for the Executive Information Service, Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, Northern Ireland Civil Service. (I was Principal Information Officer in DHSSPS, from February 04 – to end of September04)

**Length of time in post:** 8 months 2 weeks.

**Previous position and department/employer in 1995:** Principal Information Officer, Information Department, Northern Ireland Housing Executive

**Previous position and department/employer in 2000:** Principal Information Officer, Department for Social Department, Northern Ireland Civil Service.

**Previous position and department/employer in 2001:** Principal Information Officer, Department for Social Department, Northern Ireland Civil Service.

**Membership of Professionals Bodies:** None

**Particular areas of interest**

*[Please attach additional sheets if more space is required]*

**(i) How and when did you first become aware of the deaths of Adam, Lucy and Raychel?**

I took up my post as Principal Information Officer in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety at the beginning of February 2004. I am unclear as to the exact date of when I became aware of the deaths of Lucy and Raychel, however it was shortly after I took up post. My knowledge was derived from a verbal briefing on key issues that the Department was facing from a communications point of view and because of the inquest into the death of Lucy Crawford in February 2004. I am not aware of the exact date when I became aware of the death of Adam Strain but it was around August/September 2004 and was as a result of a media interest in the case.

**(ii) What was your role as Principal Information Officer in providing information and advice to the Minister and DHSSPS officials in relation to the deaths of Adam, Lucy and Raychel and the Inquests into their deaths?**

As Principal Information Officer in DHSSPS from February to September 2004, I managed the press office that acted as an interface between the media and officials in the Department. How I fulfilled this role is set out in paragraph (iii).

I did not provide information or advice at the time the three children died as I did not work in the Department at the times of their deaths.

I did not provide information or advice in relation to the Inquests of Adam or Raychel as I did not work in the Department at the time.

Together with my staff, I provided advice and guidance on handling interview bids and responding to media queries at the time of the inquest into Lucy's death in February 2004.

**Particular areas of interest (Cont'd)**

**(iii) How did you go about fulfilling that role?**

**I fulfilled this role by:**

- Handling directly or arranging for my staff to handle press queries from the media about the three deaths. This would involve taking the question from the media and then speaking to the relevant official within DHSSPS to get the information and answers to their questions, if available. Once the information was received from the official, we then framed it into a line to take (generally involved converting technical medical language into plain English to ensure the question that was asked was being fully answered). This was then passed to the Permanent Secretary, Clive Gowdy for clearance or if he was unavailable his deputy. Once approved the line was then issued to the media.
- I and my staff would also have been involved in taking interview bids from journalists to interview officials within the Department, for example, the Chief Medical Officer or the Minister about the deaths of the three children.
- I would also have worked with officials to prepare briefing material for these interviews to ensure that possible issues that the media may ask would have been adequately addressed in the responses from either the Minister or the Chief Medical Officer.
- I would also have ensured that the press office kept an overview of how the case was being reported, kept officials up to date on any issues of concern and advised on how these should be responded to.

**(iv) Where and from whom did you obtain the information on which you based the 'lines' that you recommended for the Minister and the briefings that you provided to others?**

The information for lines and briefings was obtained from the Chief Medical Officer and her officials, as well as from the Trusts involved in the case. The information from the Trusts was obtained through the communications officers in each Trust and from officials in the Department who liaised with the Trusts.

- (v) **Give details of your colleagues within the DHSSPS and others, including the rest of the UK, with whom you discussed the steps to be taken in response to the death of Adam, Lucy and Raychel and the Inquests into their deaths, to include: (a) the reason for the contact, (b) when the contact took place, (c) and the outcome of the discussions.**

Contact 1 would have been with the Minister at the time Angela Smith, MP. Contact took place on a number of occasions about the case and prior to the interview that she gave in relation to Lucy and Raychel. The outcome of the discussions would have been her response to media questions and the interview she gave the Impartial Reporter in June 2004.

Contact 2 would have been with the Permanent Secretary from I started in the Department, which was the beginning of February through to September 2004. The reason for contact would have been to discuss the media queries that we received in relation to the deaths of the three children, clear the lines to take that had been received from Health officials, discuss how the case was being reported and provide guidance on media issues.

Contact 3 would have been with the Chief Medical Officer and her various staff. The reason for contact would have been to get answers to questions raised by the media. I or my staff would have provided advice and guidance on the handling of interviews. The outcome would have been the draft lines to take that were subsequently cleared with the Permanent Secretary and interviews given to the media.

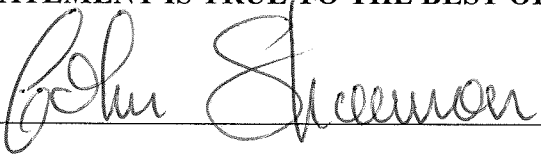
Contact 4 would have been with the communications officers in each of the relevant Trusts. The reason for contact was to ensure a consistent approach to the provision of public information.

**Other points you wish to make including additions to any previous Statements, Depositions and or Reports**

*[Please attach additional sheets if more space is required]*

The only other point I wish to make is that after an external recruitment competition for the post of Deputy Director of Communications, I was advised in August 2004 that I was successful and took up the post in the Office of the First Minister/ Deputy First Minister on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2004.

**THIS STATEMENT IS TRUE TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF**

Signed: 

Dated: 8<sup>th</sup> July 05