

McCole, Brigid (Bridget) Ellen

by Patrick Long

McCole, Brigid (Bridget) Ellen (1942–96), hepatitis C campaigner, was born 21 June 1942 at her family home in Bunawack, Glenties, Co. Donegal, daughter of John Sharkey, labourer, and Ellen Sharkey (née McCole). She was raised and educated locally and lived within Co. Donegal throughout her life. She married (14 August 1968) sheep-farmer Brian ('Briney') McCole (Mac Camhaill) from Loughaugh, Crolly, and settled there. Brigid had six sons and six daughters between 1969 and 1982. Added to the difficulty of raising so many children, family life was made harder by the chronic ill health of her husband. Then, unexpectedly, her own health became the subject of national attention in the hepatitis C scandal of 1994–6.

Stemming from the occurrence of a disease unidentified until 1989, this episode made her the central figure in a health crisis that exposed disturbing inefficiency in the state blood-transfusion services, which monitored public health safety. A blood product (immunoglobulin) known as Anti-D had been manufactured by the Blood Transfusion Services Board (BTSB) since 1970 for the treatment of pregnant women in prevention of haemolytic ('blue baby') syndrome. It was used in 1977 with the blood of a female patient who, with the board's knowledge, suffered from jaundice at about the time of the donation a year earlier. Instead of being immediately destroyed, the infected Anti-D product was inexplicably retained and subsequently administered to a large number of people, mainly pregnant women, including Brigid McCole. Between November 1977, when she received her injection of infected blood during pregnancy, and her full realisation of its outcome in 1994 she experienced a gradual deterioration in her health from about 1988, extreme fatigue and pain being the most obvious manifestations. Associating it with the stress of caring for a sick husband and a large family she, like others still in receipt of contaminated Anti-D, lived with the condition until hearing the BTSB's public announcements (21–2 February 1994) that women who had received the Anti-D product should report to centres in Dublin or Cork for blood-tests against hepatitis C.

The announcements received an overwhelming response. It emerged that many others were suffering the same symptoms as Brigid McCole, including a number of men. Hepatitis C victims were instructed to behave with extreme care in their personal habits and contact with others, a terrifying prospect resembling that of the better known Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). As with AIDS, hepatitis C was a recent disease and offered no promise of recovery. Brigid McCole's case was one of hardship from the beginning: without private transport or the comfort of a rail service she travelled frequently between Letterkenny and Dublin by bus to attend Beaumont Hospital, alone and without visitors. When the BTSB failed to act decisively in resolving the unfolding situation either through admission of liability or by offering reassurance in the form of compensation, the hepatitis C crisis became

a national scandal. A group called Positive Action was formed to represent the sufferers.

Nor did the state intervene to precipitate an early resolution. As the crisis gained momentum Brigid McCole was among the invited members of Positive Action who met President Mary Robinson in Dublin in November 1994. The meeting represented presidential solidarity with the hepatitis C campaigners but could not go beyond symbolic support in highlighting their cause. However, a photograph of Brigid McCole's handshake with the president became an important family memento and the image by which she became known to the public. In spite of a compensation tribunal being announced in September 1995 by the Fine Gael health minister, Michael Noonan, as a result of the *Expert group report* (initiated by previous Labour health minister Brendan Howlin) criticising the BTSB's part in the crisis, Brigid McCole decided to take her case to the high court. The first to do so, she claimed to seek the truth behind the scandal rather than any compensation.

In May 1996 the BTSB offered a settlement of £175,000 to forestall legal proceedings, but it was rejected. Given the already difficult social position of sufferers, brought about by the existence of a mystery blood disorder creating fears of ostracism within their communities, Mrs McCole sought the court's permission to use the pseudonym 'Brigid Roe', but this was refused. Under her own name she sued the BTSB, the state and the National Drugs Advisory Board (NDAB). Every obstacle was raised to discourage her, including the legal argument that she was simply too late to seek redress. Brigid McCole's health continued to deteriorate as the legal team supporting her and Positive Action, led by former attorney general John Rogers, SC, maintained pressure on the BTSB.

In late September 1996, as Mrs McCole lay close to death in St Vincent's Hospital, Dublin, and appeared unlikely to live to attend her hearing in the high court, the BTSB privately conceded liability. On 1 October she was presented with the board's full admission and an offer of the original £175,000 compensation, which she accepted. On 2 October 1996 she died of liver failure, officially the first person to do so as a direct consequence of hepatitis C caused by an infected Anti-D blood product. On 8 October public admission of liability was made. Subsequently, after a three-month tribunal of inquiry with its *Report* (March 1997) and the *McCole report* (August 1997), the compensation tribunal was established in law. In January–February 2002 RTÉ television broadcast 'No tears', a drama series directed by Stephen Burke, featuring Brenda Fricker as a character based on Brigid McCole.

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*Ir. Times*, 3 Oct. 1996; *Sunday Independent*, 6 Oct. 1996; *Donegal Democrat*, 10 Oct. 1996; Fergal Bowers, *Hep C: Niamh's story* (1997); Glenys Spray, *Blood, sweat*

*and tears: the hepatitis C scandal* (1998); *Ir. Times*, 9 Feb. 2002; Maev-Ann Wren, *Unhealthy state: anatomy of a sick society* (2003)

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