

UNDER THE HEALTH AND DISABILITY SERVICES ACT 1993

IN THE MATTER OF The Ministerial Inquiry into the
under-reporting of cervical
smear abnormalities

EVIDENCE OF ELEANOR JANE VERTONGEN (Patient 14)

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I, Eleanor Jane Vertongen of Hicks Bay say:

Introduction

1. I was born on 28 July 1966 and I am now aged 33 years. I am of Ngati Porou decent. I have four children aged 15, 13, 11 and 3 years. I have had three miscarriages since my baby was born in 1997. I am now expecting another child. I live at Hicks Bay, which is three hours from Gisborne.

Health History

2. I have always had regular smears because I was sexually abused as a young person and I took particular care of my cervix because of the diseases that are around. I did not opt on the cervical screening register because no one told me about it. When I went to see the doctor for other matters, for example, taking the children for an injection, I was always asked if they could take a smear just to see if everything was all right down there. I was told it was better to be safe than sorry. To the best of my knowledge, my smear results were always normal, I was not told otherwise. After the number of smears I have had I would have thought they would have found the diseases earlier.

3. On 11 November 1999, I went to see Diane Williams, (the smear taker and nurse at Te Araroa) because I had fallen off a verandah and had a sore back. Diane said that I might as well have a smear while I was there. When Diane examined me to take the smear she said that she thought I had some abnormal cells in my cervix. I remember Diane mentioning HPV. I was referred to Dr Van De Mark, a specialist at Gisborne Hospital. At this stage I was not aware that I had any misread smears.
4. At my appointment with Dr Van De Mark at Gisborne Hospital on 6 December 1999 I had a colposcopy. It was only there that I found out that I had smears misread by Dr Bottrill. Dr Van De Mark said when she was examining “*not another one of Dr Bottrill’s mistakes*”. She told me that Dr Bottrill had made a mistake reading my smears. I thought she meant one mistake. She said that my smears showed normal but in fact they were not. At the time I did not really understand what Dr Van De Mark meant.
5. Dr Van De Mark told me that I had abnormal cells in my cervix and that she would need to take more tests in hospital. For me this meant again having to travel back to Gisborne Hospital for a cone biopsy.

6. After I saw Dr Van De Mark, I was moaning and groaning to Dr Van De Mark's nurse about how I had to borrow money to get to Gisborne Hospital from Hicks Bay that day. I was worried that I did not have enough money for petrol to get back home again. It was then that the nurse told me that there was assistance for victims. I asked her what she meant by victims and she told me all those who had smears misread by Michael Bottrill. I did not know what she was talking about. She told me I was a victim because Dr Bottrill had misread my smears. For this reason I could get help from Missy Winiata.
7. It did not sink in at first that I was one of the people who had their smear misread. I had not heard about women having misread smears because up the Coast we do not hear about things like that. It was afterwards when I got home to Hicks Bay and I was on my own, I thought - I could have cancer. I could not understand that I had not been informed sooner. I felt stressed out to the max.
8. I thought about the fact that I might have to have a hysterectomy. I believed that I would not be a whole woman if that happened. The reason I have a relationship with a man is to have children, to have a happy family. I believe a man forms a relationship with a woman to carry on their seed.
9. After I heard the news my relationship with my partner got worse. I could not stand for my partner to be around me or touch me.

10. When I went to Gisborne Hospital for my cone biopsy on 22 December 1999, I was disgusted. I had to ask different nurses about where I had to go when I arrived at the hospital at 9am in the morning. When I finally reached Ward 8 the nurse asked another nurse whether there were any spare rooms. The nurse told me she did not know whether there were any spare beds because there were quite a few victims there. It was like a line up for a picture theatre, the nurse would come in and tell another woman that she was next for an operation. I felt like a guinea pig. I believe that I had my operation at about 4.30pm in the afternoon. I thought I was going mad waiting and worrying about the operation all day.
11. After I had the cone biopsy, I went home that night. I could not have sex for six weeks. Since the operation sex has been uncomfortable for me. My mate could not understand this and he thought I had another man. I bled and felt uncomfortable for about a week. I was really stressed out waiting for my results. I was also worried about my kids at this time because they had seen me on television and in the newspaper and they were worried that I had cancer.

12. I had another appointment with Diane Van De Mark at Gisborne Hospital again on 12 January 2000. This meant another three-hour trip to Gisborne from Hicks Bay. Dr Van De Mark told me that she was pleased to tell me that she had cleaned out all the CIN III, but to make sure that it did not come back that I had to go back to see her in six months. It was like getting good news and bad news at the same time.
13. I have to see Dr Van De Mark again in June 2000. I am still hurting because I don't know my verdict. A friend of mine who had a cone biopsy has been told that she has to go back into hospital again because they did not get all the abnormal cells. I worry that this will happen to me.
14. People have commented to me that I have only become involved in the Inquiry because I want money. My ACC claim has just been accepted. Although I believe I deserve compensation, I tell them to put themselves in my predicament and only then should they make any comment.
15. I know what I have been through is not as bad as a lot of other women. I have talked to other women who are victims. Some Maori women I know have not done anything about their results. They have told me that it must be their turn to die. One woman said other family members have had cancer and now it was her turn. These women put a blanket over their heads and wait to die.

16. I also feel very sad for other women who are victims who have had to have a hysterectomy. A member of my family is scared that her husband is going to leave her to find a woman who can provide children.
17. When I do a job, I make sure I have done it properly by rechecking. I always doubt that I have done it correctly, so I go back and check. I do not understand how a pathologist such as Dr Bottrill could misread my smears four times and be a professional pathologist. One mistake I could understand, as everyone makes mistakes, but to make a mistake four times is unacceptable.
18. I have often talked out of anger but common sense tells me with systems and technology, what has happened to me should not have happened.
19. I wish to give evidence in public and I do not want name suppression.

SUMMARY – Elanor Jane Vertongen

DATE	BOTTRILL	GISBORNE HOSPITAL	OTHER	AUSTRALIA
9.7.92	Normal			CIN III
23.4.94	Smear Low Grade Atypical			CIN III
17.11.94	Smear Low Grade Atypical			CIN III
15.5.95	Smear Normal			CIN III
6.12.99		Colposcopy	Smear HSIL – CIN II or CIN III Biopsy HPV, CIN II /CIN III <i>(Locketts Pang & Temple Camp)</i>	
27.12.99		LLETZ	Histology HPV, CIN III completely excised <i>(Medlab Central Palmerston North)</i>	
June 2000	Repeat check up			