

Jehovah's Witnesses incapable of free, informed refusal of blood, former adherent says

Lawrence Hughes went to court to have blood transfusions given to his daughter, 16, after she refused

By Stephen Smith, [CBC News](#) Posted: Oct 31, 2016 6:36 PM ET Last Updated: Oct 31, 2016 6:36 PM ET

Jehovah's Witnesses facing the decision of whether to receive a blood transfusion are in no position to make a free and informed refusal of the procedure, alleges former Witness Lawrence Hughes.

Hughes's 16-year-old daughter Bethany was the focus of a high-profile court battle in 2002 in Calgary, Alta., over her refusal to accept blood transfusions after being diagnosed with leukemia.

Blood transfusions are forbidden under Jehovah's Witness doctrine, which holds that the Old and New Testaments command them to abstain from blood.

"Years of intense indoctrination, attending five or more meetings a week, coupled with undue influence, pressure and coercion, rob a Jehovah's Witness of free choice," Hughes alleges.

It's a situation that applies equally to Jehovah's Witness adults, said Hughes, who was introduced to the faith at the age of 30.

That view is supported by other former Witnesses who have also contacted CBC.

Consent

In late October, Quebec Health Minister Gaétan Barrette said that Éloïse Dupuis, a 27-year-old Jehovah's Witness who died after refusing a transfusion, was "perfectly informed" about the risks of refusing a blood transfusion.

"She was informed. She signed documents many times. She knew, and she made it clear, that if something was to happen, because of her religion she didn't want any transfusion," Barrette told CBC Montreal.

Barrette expanded on that position Monday.

"It's their right to believe in what they want to believe in.... How they're educated, trained and so on, I'm not in a position to judge that. I'm just in a position to ensure that in that specific situation, there has been an instance where it was possible for the patient to have an informed consent," he said.

"Who am I to enter into this debate within their community? They have to resolve this issue themselves," he said.

- [Jehovah's Witness who died after giving birth understood risk of refusing blood, Quebec health minister says](#)

The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Canada, the faith group's legal entity, was contacted by CBC but declined to be interviewed.

Under Quebec's Civil Code, a competent adult aged 18 or older can refuse treatment as long as their refusal is considered "free" and "informed."

To be considered "free," it must be proven that the patient was not coerced into accepting or refusing treatment.

"Informed" means the adult patient understands the various treatment options and their possible risks and results.

A Quebec coroner is now investigating Dupuis's death and that of another Jehovah's Witness, 46-year-old Mirlande Cadet, to determine the circumstances involved, including whether blood transfusions were refused and, if so, whether the refusals met the standards of free and informed consent.

Both women suffered hemorrhages following caesarian sections that required emergency blood transfusions.

- [Quebec coroner investigating death of another Jehovah's Witness after childbirth](#)
- [Death of Jehovah's Witness during childbirth prompts investigation](#)

'Misinformation' and 'disfellowshipping'

Hughes alleges that the information in publications used by the Jehovah's Witnesses to educate their members is often false and hinders an informed refusal.

"They say if you get a blood transfusion, you could get AIDS or the soul of the person who donated the blood. If that person was crazy, you'll go crazy. If that person was homosexual, you'll be a homosexual," he said.

"When you're given all this misinformation, how can you make an informed decision?"

'Even wild animals protect their young.' - *Former Jehovah's Witness Lawrence Hughes*

Hughes also said he was made to sign a card declaring he would refuse blood transfusions in front of two church elders.

"If you don't sign that card, you're in big trouble," he said.

"The elders would have a meeting with you and try to adjust your thinking. They use those exact words — 'adjust your thinking'," Hughes said.

Members with too many questions about blood policy are "disfellowshipped," Hughes said, referring to the church's term for excommunication.

Hughes alleged that the combined result of this alleged "misinformation" and coercion is a form of "mind control" exerted over Jehovah's Witnesses.

"That's how a parent could sit there and watch their child bleed to death and do nothing about it. That totally goes against instinct. Even wild animals protect their young," Hughes said.

"So, for a parent to allow their child to die because they need medical treatment, that shows the power this religion has on people."

Undue influence alleged

Hughes pointed to the alleged presence of a Jehovah's Witness hospital liaison committee (HLC) outside Dupuis's room to question how free her decision was.

"Just having those people in the next room, to me, is enough undue influence," he said.

The committees are composed of respected Witness elders and are dispatched to hospitals to advise medical staff on alternative bloodless treatments.

Another former Witness told CBC that HLCs are ["intimidating" and serve to enforce blood policy](#).

Hughes said the HLC member in his daughter's case was "not helpful."

"All he did was create friction and make things more difficult," Hughes said.

In his daughter's case, Hughes said the pressure on her to refuse blood came from many sources, including hundreds of cards and letters from Witnesses all around the world "encouraging her to be faithful and die for Jehovah."

"Jehovah's Witnesses were visiting her constantly. She had HLC members and two lawyers from [Jehovah's Witness] headquarters with her. They were all encouraging her to be loyal to Jehovah," he said.

"She was given a lot of misinformation, almost on a daily basis," he said. "It made me sick to my stomach."

Hughes broke with Jehovah's Witness blood policy when his daughter became ill, saying he could find nothing in scriptures promoted by church elders that prohibited blood.

"I thought of the scriptures that weren't used in the Jehovah's Witness Bible that talked about how life was a gift from God, and we should respect that gift," Hughes said.

- [Intimidating or helpful? Jehovah's Witness hospital visits under scrutiny](#)

'Like a ghost'

Hughes approved blood transfusions for Bethany and said he found himself immediately ostracized by his wife and three daughters along with his friends and others in the Jehovah's Witness community.

"I knew I was going to lose my family, but I wanted my daughter to have a chance to live so I did everything I could to have her receive proper treatments. And I hired a large law firm to represent me," he said.

A court eventually ordered that Bethany receive the transfusions, but she died from the aggressive form of leukemia a short time later.

Hughes later sued the Watchtower Society of Canada, the legal entity of the Jehovah's Witnesses, along with its lawyers, religious leaders and doctors, accusing them of deliberately misinforming his daughter about her medical treatment in 2002 and counselling her to refuse transfusions for leukemia.

The case [was dismissed in 2008](#).

"My two daughters shunned me. My wife at that time, Bethany's mother, she shunned me. All the Jehovah's Witnesses shunned me, I was like a ghost. Nobody would talk to me they pretended like I wasn't there," Hughes said of his stand against the church's blood policy.

"That's what happens a lot of time with Jehovah's Witnesses that go up against the church. They've lost everybody and they're all alone, and I was all alone."

"I've been told by strangers that my daughters are married and have children."

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