

# The organised abuse of children in rural England

## The response of Social Services

### PART TWO

Chris Goddard

*This is the second part of an interview with a manager in a British Social Services Department; the first part appeared in Children Australia, vol. 19, no. 3.*

**CG:** Now moving on, I'm interested in the more general issues. In this case, it seems to me that you concentrated more on the abuse of the children in terms of actual sexual abuse, rather than the ritualistic or organised nature of the abuse. Is that correct? And if so, why did you do that?

**SSM:** That is correct, because I believe that we should stick with the direct evidence that we have gathered and that can be sustained. And also because we weren't working in a vacuum, we were aware that a nearby authority had had a major inquiry into so-called 'satanic' abuse, the senior management of that Social Services Department had disowned the special team that they had set up at the time to deal with the 'satanic' abuse, and we did not want to get hamstrung on whether it was 'satanic' abuse or not. As far as I was concerned, it was sexual abuse. That was proven. We knew that the girls had been sexually abused, we knew the mother had been reported by the girls to be actively involved in this, and had failed to protect them from other adults in sexual abuse. And to me that was the key. If there were ritualistic trappings to it, I don't know if that makes the abuse any worse or any better. The abuse was enough to warrant removing the children from this.

**CG:** There are a number of issues in this it seems to me, and one of them is how difficult it has been for professionals and others to believe what adults can do to children. Certainly, it is only in recent years that I have been able to believe that these things go on. It seems to me that

there is a major problem in the community because it is clear from the media coverage in England that the press and the community, if the press is a reflection of the community, don't believe that such abuse can occur.

**SSM:** I would agree with that because I think that we have been so used to children being sexually abused by so called 'caring adults', we can readily believe it now. We don't look for the man in the dirty mac or something that marks a man who sexually abuses children out physically, or a woman for that matter. We are not so used to the allegations of organised abuse so we find that much more difficult to comprehend, both as professionals and as individual members of the local community. It is particularly difficult when the social workers who are meeting directly the people who are the subject of allegations, who are to all intents and purposes 'ordinary people'. It is very difficult to imagine, for example, the grandparents in this case, dressing up in outfits that suggest witchcraft or devil worship, smearing the children with the blood of chickens. It's very difficult to imagine human beings doing this. But then fifteen years ago, we found it very difficult to imagine fathers would sexually abuse young children, from a few months old right through to adolescence.

**CG:** Do you think that Social Services Departments have a responsibility to make it clearer to the community that these things do occur?

**SSM:** I think that that should always be part of our role, informing our community what exactly goes on

in our community, not in any prurient or missionary sense, but in a sense that we are providers of services for a specific community, and I think people have a right to know what sort of services we provide and why we have to provide them. So, yes, I think that we should do it, but only when we are certain of our ground and that's where we find it difficult in terms of 'ritual', 'satanic' or organised abuse.

**CG:** You read out the closing comments of the judge in the High Court and I'd never heard those before. There is surely a case for other local authorities to be aware of that judgement, and aware of the praise for Social Services, but I've never read it. On the other hand, when something goes wrong we hear about it, even in Australia. Do you think Social Services Departments should be getting together more and sharing information, for example, sharing that judgement? Are workers in other Social Services Departments aware of that?

**SSM:** I'm fairly certain they're not. If there is one thing that Social Services Departments are very bad at it is sharing the good things that go on. And I'm not aware that there were any efforts made to promote that round the different departments. The irony I find, is that it was after the fourth child's wardship case, and at the request of the parents, that the judge ordered there should be no further publicity around the case, which is interesting. Why the parents should be allowed to change from having the media as their constant companion over the weeks to requesting no further publicity, presumably

because they were aware of what the judge had said and did not want the publicity to discredit their stories in the paper.

**CG:** We've skirted around the terms that we are using here, eg, 'ritual' abuse, 'satanic' abuse. Is it important what we call it?

**SSM:** It is important for professionals and for members of the public. For professionals, if we are to learn from each other then it's very important that we understand the terms we are using. For the public, there has been a growth recently in religious or semi-religious organisations who are determined to uncover witchcraft, orgiastic goings-on of a satanic nature which they are determined to find and, in my view, exploit for their own purposes. So I think we have to be very careful when we are using the term 'satanic', so that the general public is not confused by religious organisations. I prefer 'ritualised' or 'organised abuse' to 'satanic abuse', because it's easy to lose sight of the fact that it's the abuse that is important and not the 'satanic' nature of it.

**CG:** We seem to have stricter judgments of credibility where children are concerned rather than for adults. Was this a problem in this case and do you think it is a major issue in the handling of these sorts of cases?

**SSM:** I think it's an issue which requires Social Services Departments to walk a very fine line. We seem to have become objects of criticism recently for what are seen as blanket statements: everything a child says is true, honest and correct, but, in fact, children say things for various reasons. Our view is that children should be believed unless we can find some reason to cause disbelief, and we do look at the causes of why children are saying things. Ironically, the credibility of younger children is easier for us to accept than older children, because some of the things said to us by younger children they couldn't know in their 'normal' experience of life and that prompts us to ask why the children are saying this. In almost 100% of those cases, it comes down to the fact that they are saying it because it's true, because it has happened to them, and they haven't got the experience to make such things up. Whereas as children become teenagers, they may have the experience to invent things like this. The issue around the majority of

sexual abuse cases that we are involved in, is that where there is physical evidence, the only aspect in doubt is who the perpetrator is, so if a child has been penetrated either anally or vaginally then that is evidence that some person has abused that child in some way and the doubt comes with who it was. I find that most children most of the time are very honest or it's very clear that they are fantasising, playing games. They tend not to fantasise or play games, however, about sexual abuse. The general public find it more difficult to accept because people don't want to believe that this sort of thing happens. Therefore the easiest thing is to discredit the person who is saying it and it's very easy to discredit a young child.

**CG:** Shoot the messenger rather than listen to the message. These cases also can tend to divide the community. You've said that in this case, the family used certain leaders in the community to support them. It's quite common for the community to be divided in these sorts of issues. Was that a problem in this case?

**SSM:** It wasn't a massive problem, but it's a similar problem to the effects of the media on the case. We can't answer back. The parents can say what they like about the way Social Services have handled things, what their version of events is, whereas we can't say 'but hold on a minute'. The only community leaders that we were able to inform were the County councillors for that area and the local member of parliament. We were able to let them know just what the basis of the proceedings was. So they were aware, but by then the damage had been done because they had been confronted by the media saying, 'Don't you think it's awful the way this young couple and their parents are being treated when they are upstanding members of the community?'

**CG:** It seems to me that this is a good point to move on to the relationship between the media and Social Services more generally. What do you think the media is up to, what's the reason for this media interest, and is there some underlying reason for their continuous and repeated attack on Social Services?

**SSM:** It's difficult for me to answer that. I think social workers are always good copy for the press because we're either portrayed as woolly-minded do-gooders who go

round doing more harm than good (and it's easy to caricature social workers like that), or we are part of the interfering nanny state that comes from conservative politicians who know what's best. I think the reality is somewhere between those two extremes. We are charged by society with doing a very difficult job in protecting children. When we fail to protect children, then we are pilloried, though I am not aware of social workers ever having killed or maimed a child. It's not the same thing that happens to the police. The police are not blamed either as individuals or a whole about the rising number of murders in this country, for example. The medical profession is not blamed when people die in hospital. Even when individual members of organisations like the police or the medical profession are found to be negligent in some way, it doesn't lend itself to an attack on the profession as a whole. With social workers, given the number of social workers there are, there are going to be a number of individuals who make mistakes and some of them are going to result in tragic consequences because of the nature of the job. That is then turned into an attack on the profession as a whole. Why that should be I don't know, except that we seem to be pretty defenceless. We don't press home the good things that we do. We sit back and take the crap that is thrown at us.

**CG:** What can social workers do to alter their image?

**SSM:** The problem is the image rather than the reality. I think what Social Services Departments can do is to be constantly finding outlets for publicising the good things that Social Services are able to achieve. There are cases every day where Social Services achieve something for people. We had a case recently where the judge congratulated the social worker on the work done with a family of eight children whom we took to Court. Six children were made subject to Care Orders and two children Supervision Orders and the judge congratulated us on the thoroughness of our work, but that's as far as it went. That should be in the local press, if not in the national press. There is a certain amount of information coming through in the social work trade press that a number of those children who were returned home in the Cleveland inquiry have since been readmitted

to care, but that's confined to the social work press. That ought to be in the national press as well. It's very difficult because, as a general rule, newspapers don't want good news stories, they want bad news stories.

**CG:** This case had a lot of aspects involving 'ritual' abuse. The children were clearly involved in perverted sexuality, they were clearly intimidated by what went on, they were involved in pornography, and in animal sacrifice. What is the advice you could give to others who might be involved in similar cases?

**SSM:** I think the major lesson for social workers in general is to be prepared to believe that there are no limits to what human beings might get up to. And I think there ought to be more research into the after effects of this sort of abuse on young children, if we are going to be able to help them to grow up as ordinary, average young people without this experience dominating their lives, particularly as there is evidence that some abused children grow up to be abusers themselves. And I'm not sure how sufficient the expertise is to help these few children overcome what is, in my experience, the only case of its kind that has happened in this area.

In terms of staff, there is a vast amount of support needed for staff both inside and outside the department. It's a very harrowing experience listening to very young children tell stories like these two told, partly because of the nature of the sexual abuse and partly because of what else was happening. So I think there is a need for experienced counsellors to be working with social workers.

**CG:** You mentioned the staff. You also said when you introduced the case, that some of the disclosures of the 'ritual' or 'organised' abuse were made to the foster parents. How can we assist foster parents in coping with such traumatic messages from children?

**SSM:** The foster carers had an exceedingly hard time and, in my opinion, did a very good job. They had a hard time because the young girls were stating things beyond the foster parents' experience. It became clear that the children had a very deep sexualised attitude to life which, for that age, was very difficult for foster carers to cope with and very

difficult for their own daughters to cope with. The daughters were about ten and eight years old, and they became quite upset at some of the things the girls were saying. The abused children didn't believe, for example, that the foster carer wasn't abusing the his own daughters, so they were very frightened of the foster father, as they were frightened of all males for a long time. The abused children seemed to want to protect the daughters from their father, which was very distressing for the whole family. We asked the foster carers not to discuss with the two girls but just to note down what they were saying and to keep a record of what was said. And they found that very difficult because, as human beings you want to interact with the children. We were afraid that when it came to Court, we would be accused of coaching the children, of putting words into their mouths. It was a very harrowing experience which, to their credit, they kept going over a period of 18 months in all, and they gradually saw improvement in the girls. But even by the time they moved on from the foster carers as two prospective adoptees, they weren't normal five and seven year old girls.

**CG:** What sort of behaviour were they exhibiting?

**SSM:** Very sexualised behaviour. They would masturbate regularly, they were still clinging to female company and still showing some fear of strange adult males. They had got used to the foster father by then and accepted him, but with other visitors to the house, their behaviour was unpredictable. It almost seemed, at the start, that they expected to be involved in some sort of sexual or group activity every time the foster carers' relatives, for example, came to the house. But that sort of thing gradually disappeared. They were very afraid for a long time, afraid of churches and wouldn't go in. The foster carers took them to see a church. Both girls screamed and screamed and refused to go in, and I'm not sure to this day whether they have overcome that fear of churches.

**CG:** There were a number of lessons in the Orkneys report. For example, the planning and recording, joint training with the police, all those sorts of things. Do you think any of those recommendations are relevant to this case?

**SSM:** I think we have moved on as a local authority since the time when we first became involved in this case. We now have regular joint training with the police, there is a police child protection team established, and where possible in every case of abuse, physical or sexual, we have a strategy meeting with the police and work out how we are going to deal with the allegations, who is going to do what. We have video-recorded interviews with the children, we are far better at communicating with other agencies, and gathering information in a more systematic way. We have an instruction from the Director of Social Services that we don't become involved in 'dawn raids' now. With any case coming up now which had a profile as high as this one, we would involve senior management in the planning of it. We always inform the parent of the allegations (unless the parent cannot be found) before we interview the child, and allow the parent to be present unless it's the parent who is the subject of the allegation as the perpetrator. But as a general rule, in sexual abuse cases, the child's mother is present when the child is interviewed. So there are a number of safeguards that have come about that weren't part of our procedures at the time this case first came to our attention.

**CG:** That is probably a good point at which to end, because what you are saying is, that perhaps one of the things that the media and the public, as well as the professionals, have to realise is that our knowledge is developing as we handle these cases, and we can't be expected to handle them perfectly every time when our experience is so limited.

**SSM:** I think that is very true. If we look back less than 30 years, when we denied the existence of physical abuse, and less than 20 years when we denied the existence of sexual abuse, we've come a long way since then. We're still trying to learn from every experience, which goes back to a comment you made earlier that we should be passing this sort of thing round to different authorities, not only to say 'we got a good judgement' and 'didn't we do well', but also the lessons that we've been able to learn from it so that other authorities wouldn't necessarily make some of the mistakes that we inevitably made. ♦



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