Sed quid custodiet ipsos custodes?

Reflections on abuse of vulnerable children, the nature of institutions, the heart of social work, the need to speak out, shooting messengers and other important matters

An interview with Alison Taylor

Chris Goddard

INTRODUCTION

Abuse of children in care challenges many of the assumptions we make about children, their care, and those who are paid to protect them. Alison Taylor was dismissed from her position in north Wales because she 'refused to ignore persistent and widespread allegations' about the serious abuse of children in care (Taylor, 1998: 41). Public concern about this abuse grew and, to cut a very long story short, a public inquiry was held. The report of the inquiry, chaired by Sir Ronald Waterhouse, was published earlier this year *(Lost in Care*, 2000), and runs to more than 900 pages.

The inquiry sat for more than 200 days to hear evidence and submissions, from early 1997 until April 1998. The inquiry heard the oral evidence of more than 250 witnesses and received the written evidence of more than 300. I attended the inquiry briefly and I have written about those experiences both in this journal (Goddard, 1998) and the broader media (Goddard, 1997).

Over the years, I had heard and read a great deal about these events in north Wales. Some of the articles in the UK media made a significant impression on me. Many of them referred to the role of Alison Taylor in bringing the abuse to public attention. I wrote to Alison asking if she would be prepared to be interviewed. She agreed and the following interview is the result.

Alison is now an award-winning novelist (I particularly recommend In Guilty Night, published by Penguin in 1997) and she is a regular contributor to *Community Care*. She wrote a chapter in Geoffrey Hunt's (1998) book, *Whistle blowing in the social services* (published by Arnold).

This interview took place before the publication of *Lost in Care* (2000). I am grateful to Alison for the time she made available to me, and for prompting the quote from Juvenal which forms part of the title of this article.

PLEASE NOTE I = Interviewer (Chris Goddard)
R = Respondent (Alison Taylor)

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THE INTERVIEW

I: It would be very instructive for people to understand how your anxieties about child abuse first arose, and how that led to the action you took. Was there a gradual awakening to the reality of the situation?

R: My instincts certainly recognised that something was seriously amiss quite some time before I actually accepted the true nature of the problem.

Firstly, let me give you some personal background. I went to grammar school in Derbyshire and later began reading for a degree in architecture; however, my interest in architecture centred mainly on its history, and I soon realised I'd made a wrong career choice. Nonetheless, my studies led to a much greater understanding of the structures and conflicts of society, of the way people function and what happens when they fail to fit in, and I developed an intense curiosity about people.

I was in my late 20s before I began full time work. I had a young child and I also wanted to avoid making another wrong career choice. In 1970, after a period of private study and voluntary work, I took a post as a teacher and industrial therapist in a psychiatric hospital in north Wales, and from there, was appointed deputy head of a 28 bed mixed sex psychiatric rehabilitation unit for adults. When the manager was seconded for training, I took over. The work was absorbing, and we were able to develop the unit as a viable alternative to hospitalisation.

1974 was a very difficult year, marred by family and personal tragedy. Trying to concentrate on my career, I applied for a post in Sheffield, as deputy head of a large probation and bail unit for adult male offenders. I'd always had a strong interest in criminology, but was in fact surprised to be appointed – putting a woman in such a job was experimental, to say the least.

Although fascinating, the work was very challenging, and at times, quite gruelling. We dealt with a cross-section of serious offenders, and functioned as a remand unit when local prisons became overcrowded. A significant proportion of the residents were young men who had graduated from the care system; clearly, that system had failed to divert them from offending, and had not had any beneficial effects on their conduct or life chances.

In 1976, my second child was born, although I had been told after a miscarriage two years earlier that I would never have more children. The birth created something of a dilemma: I didn't want to bring up my child in an inner city area, and having a young baby obviously altered my own perspectives and priorities. I decided to return home to north Wales and contacted Gwynedd County Council for a post. Late in 1976, I was appointed deputy head of the Council's flagship assessment centre for children and adolescents, which had then been open some 6 months. I'd been in the post only a few weeks when a visiting social worker told me I'd committed professional suicide in taking the job – when I asked why, she said: 'You'll find out.'

Residential social work was my preferred environment, and by that time, I had considerable experience with other client groups, but none in child care. Initially, I thought my perception of the situation related to that lack of experience, but the first few weeks at the assessment centre were truly a baptism of fire. There was no induction, no training, no proper support, no real expertise, and not enough staff. The place was virtually bursting at the seams with very needy, and very distressed adolescents, many of whom were girls, and the atmosphere bordered on chaotic, yet we were somehow supposed to conduct a formalised and formal assessment of the children upon which their long term management would be determined.

Six weeks or so after my appointment, the head of the centre went on sick leave and never returned; then, and later, I was accused of provoking his departure. He was the only staff member not to work shifts, and one weekend, when he was away, three girls absconded, primarily because they wanted to go home – home being a village in the furthest reaches of what was an enormous county area. To me, their behaviour was perfectly understandable and predictable – north Wales is a place of huge psychological distances, and to them, the assessment centre was in foreign territory. I didn't punish the girls, and did not view their absconding as active delinquency, but the centre head disagreed. He returned on the Monday morning, read the log book, and took the girls into his own quarters. When I heard shouting, I followed, and was absolutely appalled to find him ranting wildly and slapping each of them in turn. I sent the girls out and tried to reason with him, but he was beyond listening. I then contacted the deputy director of social services, told him what had happened and asked him to come immediately.

He, the head and myself sat in the head's quarters, and I waited for the deputy director to make a decision about dealing with the assault, but what transpired was surreal. Later, I realised I was expected to agree to a collusion that clearly had precedents; at the time, I demanded to know what the deputy director intended to do, particularly as the head was clearly not fit to continue work at that point. The deputy director then said to me: 'What are *you* going to do about it?' I replied that it wasn't my decision to make, and he then asked what I would do if he did nothing.

I: That sounds like something out of 'Yes Minister'.

R: It was bizarre. After more circular argument, I told the deputy director that if he refused to act, I would have no choice but to go further – to the director and perhaps, even the police. Consequently, but obviously reluctantly, he sent the head on sick leave and I was left in charge. Despite the effect of this crisis on existing shortfalls in staffing and support, there was no management input, and things went from bad to worse. At one stage, only myself and one care assistant were available to provide 24 hour care for up to 15 youngsters. We were barely able to offer adequate bed and board, let alone a professional childcare service.

This appalling situation went on for over a year, while the department refused to make a decision on the head's future, despite their knowing that I did not want the head's post because of my domestic commitments. Indeed, during this period, I barely saw my children. In addition to working a minimum of 40 hours each week, I did at least three sleeping in duties, and also had to provide night and weekend supervision, which often became long stretches on duty.

The post was eventually advertised, and one Saturday afternoon I was about to go out with my children when a man turned up, with his wife, demanding to be shown round the building. I apologised, but refused; although he said he had applied for the headship, he was a total stranger, and I had no intention of allowing him access to vulnerable children.

Next week, all hell broke loose – he had obviously complained to the department. When I pointed out that he should have made a proper appointment – to me, a perfectly reasonable response – I was perceived as being difficult and unreasonable.

I: Was this the man who eventually got the job?

R: Yes. Nefyn Dodd.

(NB: Dodd was named in the Waterhouse Report, and has since died)

I: A good start to the relationship.

R: I saw it as something that happened through lack of forethought, and thought no more of it, although it was firmly entrenched in Dodd's mind from the outset.

Dodd had previously worked at Bryn Estyn in Clwyd. He was presented as having years of experience in child care and management and I hoped we would now be able to offer a professional childcare service. However, I remained responsible for all assessments and most of the administration: his shortcomings fast became apparent. What could be called the honeymoon period lasted a few months, and he then began to show his true colours. He was tall, very heavily-built, prone to the foulest language, and often extremely aggressive. His mood would turn without warning, and he was a frightening and intimidating presence. The children became very uptight and unwilling to talk, and their behaviour noticeably deteriorated.

History repeated itself. One Monday morning, I witnessed his beating a boy who had absconded home at the weekend because Dodd had, for no reason whatsoever, refused a promised leave. I told Dodd very bluntly that if I ever again saw anything like that, I would immediately report him to the police. Dodd interpreted my statement literally: he was immensely devious. I *heard* mutterings amongst the children, I *sensed* abuses were happening, but I *saw* nothing.

All institutions, not just children's homes, function with their own reality. That reality absorbs people, persuading them to

abide by a completely different set of rules within the walls of the institution, and to accept the unacceptable. Institutions have an insidious ability to turn normal and civilised human beings into monsters, but no one understands that at the time.

I: Returning to Dodd, are you saying he interpreted what you said about reporting him to mean that he could do as he pleased as long as you didn't know about it?

R: No, he knew me well enough to know exactly what I meant. He became more careful, the way abusers do. Knowing I was watching him, he also did his best to make my life a misery, by telling the staff not to speak to me, by purveying rumour and mischief. When that failed to force my resignation, he tried his utmost to engineer my dismissal by presenting false reports to management, whom he fast learned to manipulate to his own advantage. That also failed to work, and for a time, he was, to my face, my best friend, although he was only biding time.

In 1980 I was seconded for two years full time professional training, and was very glad to escape from an increasingly stressful and unpleasant environment. When I returned to Gwynedd in 1982, I reopened, as a children's home, a former adolescents' unit that had closed after a series of avoidable management failures. The new home, Ty Newydd, was to specialise in rehabilitation, but offer also remand and assessment placements.

In my absence, Dodd had been promoted: the post of principal officer for residential services for children was created for him, and enabled him to gain a complete stranglehold on the service, because management, lacking true expertise and interest, were content to hand over control to someone who presented himself as the archetypal trouble shooter. Managers of individual homes, like myself, had absolutely no authority, and were forced to defer to Dodd over the most trivial matters. He was also the sole avenue of communication for complaints, even when children claimed he had abused them. There was, above Dodd, a whole social services management structure of principal officers, deputy director and director, and similar structures in other departments such as personnel and staffing, yet the concrete ceiling Dodd created met with general approval, and staff were barred from communicating with management on pain of disciplinary action. No one, not even a person of the greatest integrity, should have such power. Dodd was a serial child abuser, who acquired power for his own ends and abused it mercilessly.

Dodd was never prosecuted, although it emerged during the Waterhouse Inquiry that over 70 separate charges had been referred to the Crown Prosecutions Service, including serious sexual assaults, buggery, and such brutal and persistent beatings that some of the children he assaulted feared they would not live to see another dawn.

When I opened Ty Newydd, the first admissions were children fresh from the community. However, children, once in care, tend to go from place to place, and I soon had children on transfer from the assessment centre, and others who had once been there. Between 1982 and 1985, more and more were reporting having suffered abuse themselves, having witnessed it, or having been told of it – in effect, presenting evidence that a culture of abuse was flourishing at the assessment centre. The knowledge was apparently widespread amongst residential staff, but no one cared enough, believed enough, or was brave enough, to act.

Belief is crucial. Although unaware of the fact for a long time, my professional training had conditioned me to question everything a client said or did, especially a child in care, unless it was an admission of misbehaviour or criminal offences. Suspicion of *motive* lies at the heart of the social worker's response, a consequence of inherent conflict in the roles of client and worker. Because children in care are labelled as dishonest, disruptive and delinquent, people respond accordingly, whether or not the label is warranted. By definition, once in care, a child loses credibility as a human being and becomes a problem.

I began to function as something of a split personality: in part the social worker with all the received wisdoms of the profession, in part the independent individual who was hearing too much to ignore. Too many children were reporting abuses, as well as gross neglect; too many complaints were swept under the carpet; too many children disappeared to distant secure unit placements, without any casework justification, when they were about to disclose abuse. I specifically analysed the complaints in order to exclude collusion between children, and also tried to investigate individual motive, but was left with a very disturbing picture.

Knowing how the Council functioned, and the extent to which Dodd had consolidated his power base and was not subject to any checks or balances, I realised that hard evidence was needed before anyone would listen to me. I embarked on collecting as much as possible, not by deliberately questioning children, but by being willing to listen. Word travelled amongst the children that I was deeply unhappy about their situation and that they could speak in confidence.

I: How did you go about collecting evidence?

R: I wrote down what I already knew and whatever else was reported, but also made it clear to the children what I was doing and that nothing would be taken further without their consent. Many wanted action taken, because they knew that what was happening was very wrong: that was a very telling illustration of how moral conscience resided in the children, but not the professionals, which is rather frightening. More frightening was the fact that many also *expected* to be abused whilst in care, and regarded abuse, no matter how serious, as part of the care package.

When a boy who was resident at Ty Newydd but attending school at the assessment centre was seriously assaulted by the teacher there, who was very close to Dodd, I had first hand evidence, including statements from the boy and a witness and a hospital report on the injury. I sent this evidence to the director of social services, but never even received a reply. Another department sent an insurance claim form for the boy to fill in, and I had a telephone call from Dodd's wife, who said: 'How could you report us? We thought you were our friend.'

Subsequently, the battle lines were drawn up, but for me, the crunch came later, with another boy's death. He was very needy and immature, and had already done the rounds of the children's homes. I readmitted him to Ty Newydd at a real crisis point, on the deputy director's instructions. However, Dodd had complete control over all placements – to the extent that not even the director could override his decisions – and when he discovered the boy at Ty Newydd, he moved him, simply because he had not consented to the admission. The boy was sent to a hostel, completely bereft of support and supervision, and died not long afterwards, from a combination of drugs and neglect; by neglect, I mean cold and near-starvation. His death pulled me up short; *this* was the end result of our social work intervention.

I had no illusions about my own likely fate once I took my concerns outside the social services department. My husband was unemployed and we depended on my income, but inaction was no longer an option. My children, both of whom suffered considerably over the years for my conscience, were then, and always have been, completely supportive. I made arrangements to see a local councillor, and put to him not just the abuse allegations but the disgraceful situation within the social services department.

I: This was a councillor from Gwynedd County Council?

R: Yes. He was a university lecturer and I chose him because he was something of an outsider. Although deeply disturbed by what I told him, he was uncertain about what action he could take. I stressed the criminality of the abuse allegations, and suggested he followed the logical course. I believe he consulted a solicitor, who told him he must approach the police.

When the police commenced investigating early in 1986, my hopes were high; six months later, they were comprehensively dashed. The investigation was carried out by Chief Superintendent Gwynne Owen, then head of North Wales Police CID, and the report he put together for the Crown Prosecutions Service, which only saw the light of day at the Tribunal, completely damned me and the children who complained. He uncovered more abuse than I had reported, from children whom I had not known, yet decided I had provoked the allegations by force of personality – he said I was 'gifted' in dealing with troubled children - and by bribing some children with cigarettes. A boy who had been brutally beaten was considered to have deserved such treatment, and was described as 'dull and wicked'. Hence, CPS declined to prosecute.

In December, I was suspended after suggesting to Dodd's line manager, an assistant director, that the Council should investigate the abuse allegations, and was later charged with 'orchestrating' the police investigation with 'fabricated' allegations against Dodd.

Two further police investigations took place whilst I was under suspension, provoked by information from new sources, but I knew nothing of these at the time. At the Tribunal, it emerged that Owen had met the director of social services in September 1986 and informed her that Dodd was abusing children and was unfit for his post. No written record of this meeting ever existed, and knowledge of it was suppressed for over 12 years, only emerging because the Tribunal insisted on Owen's giving testimony after I remarked during my own evidence that I believed some report was made by the police to the Council.

I: So as late as the Tribunal they were still hiding.

R: Very much so. I'm sure the police hoped Owen's report would never come to light. It was extremely controversial, because he had no evidence whatsoever to support the statements he made about me. The police adviser to the Tribunal, the former chief constable of an English force, was absolutely scathing of Owen's investigation and his report.

I believe Owen's response to the abuse he uncovered should have been far more robust, but instead, there was collusion of a kind between the various authority structures.

In November 1987, I was dismissed for gross misconduct, on the grounds that I caused a breakdown in colleague relationships by reporting abuse allegations to the police. The Council knew of my domestic circumstances, and knew dismissal would have a devastating effect on the family: obviously, the welfare of my children, one of whom was only 11, was of no concern to them. Dismissal effectively destroyed my career, and my health suffered considerably. Nevertheless, the Council made several grave errors of judgement, firstly, by prejudging that Dodd was not a serial abuser, despite extensive evidence of his brutality, and secondly, by prejudging the outcome of my dismissal. The Council assumed I would be completely neutralised, but to the local community, the dismissal demonstrated which side of the fence I stood. Information began coming to me from all kinds of different sources, particularly the families of children who had been in care.

I: So you didn't even have to seek more information? It came to you.

R: It was there for the taking. When I was able to visit people I'd been told about, even on council estates where the residents were seethingly hostile to anyone remotely connected to the authorities, I was welcomed into their homes. Those with nothing to tell me were perfectly happy to point me in the direction of someone who *did* have information.

This is what no one foresaw. Had I not been dismissed, the Council could have controlled me, but I had my freedom. And I wasn't inclined just to sit in a corner licking my wounds, because the very fact that my dismissal had been so contrived proved to me that the Council had something to keep quiet and to fear.

I: But did you ever doubt yourself at any stage?

R: I doubted myself up to a point at some stages beforehand. In matters like these, it's extremely hard to accept that you're actually being told what you *think* you're being told, and the first response is assuming misinterpretation, the next rationalisation. But in truth, people are much the same everywhere, and the difference is only one of degree between child abusers in Britain and, say, the Balkanites happy to butcher their neighbours during the recent conflict. History has innumerable examples of the human capacity for evil, but accepting that it occurs near to home and in the present day is daunting. Such issues don't normally face people in an average life time.

Self doubt also interferes with your motives for taking action: are you simply out to cause trouble for others or to gain attention? Adult thought processes are usually fairly muddied, whereas children have much clearer perspectives. My own children were completely sure about what I must do, and indeed, my younger child became impatient with what were, in truth, my own delaying tactics. His view was very simple: something wrong was happening, and therefore, I had to act to stop it. Nonetheless, accepting that my professional colleagues seemed willing to countenance abuse, that they worked without an ethical manifesto, and that there seemed to be a moral vacuum at the heart of the profession itself, constituted a long, hard process of readjustment. Such profound disillusionment, after 17 years in a profession, is deeply unpleasant and isolating, and I suspect that's why many of my colleagues shied away from taking the same path. Once psychological separation from the professional identity takes place, support structures are lost, and where people define themselves by their work, personal identity will collapse.

I: In the time after you lost your job, and were hearing more and more stories of abuse, where did your support come from?

R: My own children were incredibly supportive, and there was tremendous moral support from children who had been in care and from their families. That said, I've never needed support in order to function, and I've always preferred to make my own decisions and be very independent; so, in presuming dismissal would be a body blow, Gwynedd County Council made another serious error of judgement. I try to do what I believe is right, and most of the time, that coincides with what other people want you to do.

I: And on this occasion?

R: When it was necessary to swim against the tide, I had the strength to do so, partly because I'd done it before, but never over anything so important.

I: What happened next?

R: I decided to start at the top and work down, rather than spend time trying to provoke action at local level. I put together a history of the situation and details of my concerns and sent the information to Margaret Thatcher, then Prime Minister, to the Home Secretary, the Social Services Inspectorate, the Secretary of State for Wales, and any other person or body who might have sufficient interest to intervene. I was also corresponding with the Deputy Chief Constable of North Wales Police, outlining my concerns about the 1986 investigation.

I: And what sort of responses did you get?

R: Thatcher asked me for more and more information, and I began to feel optimistic, not realising then that the constitutional organization of Wales would prove an almost insurmountable obstacle: everything was referred back to the Welsh Office, which delivered government in Wales on behalf of Westminster. When I contacted the Welsh Office before I was dismissed, they refused to intervene in what they described as 'local authority matters'; now, they continued to refuse, claiming the issue was outside their remit, despite their wide powers of inspection and enforcement and their responsibility for child welfare. I knew this was nonsense, but I also suspected Gwynedd County Council had told the Welsh Office that I was the source and extent of the abuse allegations, something that was confirmed at the Tribunal.

I learned a great deal during this period, about worming my way around obstacles instead of trying to demolish them, about governmental structures in Britain, and particularly, about the hidden loci of power.

My relationship with North Wales Police rapidly deteriorated when I continued to press for answers to the nagging questions surrounding the 1986 investigation, and for information about the 1987 investigation, which had been kept very much under wraps. Nothing was open and above board, as it should have been, and there was no impetus from the police towards public accountability. Because I had information from certain sources, including the Crown Prosecutions Service, that conflicted with the assertions being made by the police, the police became quite aggressive and the shutters went down. In 1989 the Deputy Chief Constable wrote to inform me that they were not prepared to enter into any more correspondence or to answer any more questions.

In 1991, events began to coincide. North Wales Police had considerable internal difficulties with poor management and morale, which resulted in an independent enquiry. I'd related my worries about the police to a councillor from the neighbouring county of Clwyd, where serious allegations of child abuse were also emerging. Then, following the conviction of two former Clwyd social workers for child sexual abuse, Clwyd County Council asked North Wales Police to mount a retrospective investigation of all its children's homes. David Williams, then a producer for Harlech Television (HTV), produced a documentary about the abuse allegations in Gwynedd, which forced Gwynedd County Council to ask for the Clwyd investigation to be extended to Gwynedd.

David Williams' documentary was the first proper public exposure of the situation in Gwynedd. Subsequently, the national media took up the issue, keeping a close eye on the police investigation, which lasted from 1991 to 1993, and was, at the time, the most extensive child abuse investigation ever. In 1991, I put together a document, running to some 140 pages, that detailed all the information then in my possession, and handed it to North Wales Police.

The Welsh Office was completely compromised by what was coming to light about abuse in the north Wales children's homes and by the evidence of negligence and appalling management on the part of Gwynedd and Clwyd county councils. No doubt mindful of the years they themselves had spent deliberately ignoring the facts, the Welsh Office promised to hold a public inquiry once any prosecutions were completed. When, at the first opportunity, they reneged on that promise, I wasn't in the least surprised.

By 1994, there was hope of a turning point in my personal life, after so long in the wilderness. After dismissal, I made a claim for unfair dismissal to the Industrial Tribunals, the courts which hear such cases, and in 1989, Gwynedd County

Council had been forced into a settlement, where the dismissal was withdrawn, and I received compensation together with all my legal costs. Nonetheless, my career as a social worker had been destroyed, and my health - problematic since childhood because of rheumatoid arthritis - reacted badly to events, making the possibility of further employment remote. Not long after losing my job, and in between writing letters to the government, I started writing short stories. After working for so long, inactivity was hard to accept, and this was one way of combating the psychological deterioration that idleness can so quickly cause. One of these stories had real potential for development, and although completing a full-length book is rather like running a marathon, the work gathered its own momentum. Despite a nasty accident in 1993, followed by remedial orthopaedic surgery and months with my hand in a splint, the book was finished and accepted for publication late in 1994. At the same time, I received a contract for a second novel, and effectively, acquired a new persona.

R: Once the novel was published in 1995, I acquired a different kind of influence and new credibility: people were interested in me because of the book, then learned of my background and became interested in the child abuse issue. For want of a better term, I discovered new power bases, in the most unlikely places.

Instead of holding the promised public inquiry, the Welsh Office had instructed a barrister to examine documents and to decide if such an inquiry were necessary. I wrote to the Treasury Solicitor, the government office overseeing the barrister's work, asking why no witness evidence was to be heard and asking for details of the documents being examined. Would the records of North Wales Police be examined? Were all the documents I'd submitted over the years part of the exercise? Politely, I was told to mind my own business, so I reminded the Treasury Solicitor's office that several Members of Parliament were by then gravely concerned about the whole matter.

The barrister's report to the Welsh Office was intended to be completely confidential: the Welsh Office would only relay the decision and later, publish a summary. One morning, however, the report arrived with our post, sealed inside two plain envelopes. Whoever sent it did considerable good, for having the document allowed me access to the barrister's frames of reference and to the factors underlying the decision that a public inquiry was only likely to be of historical interest, enabling me to put forward the suggestion that the barrister's earlier professional experiences could have interfered with the decision-making.

By mid 1996, the north Wales child abuse saga had become a source of deep embarrassment to the government, and was potentially very damaging. John Major, then Prime Minister, ordered William Hague, then Secretary of State for Wales, to announce the establishment of a Tribunal of Inquiry, an investigative mechanism last used in Britain after the Aberfan disaster of 1966.

I: You lost your job, which is bad enough, but were you ever afraid for yourself? Did you ever receive threats? The police, for instance, wherever you are in the world, are fairly unforgiving of those who throw down the gauntlet.

R: Quite, and there *were* incidents that caused me concern. My son was also victimised for a while by his school headmaster, who was very close to Dodd and was himself the subject of several abuse allegations. The victimisation continued even after I'd contacted the Director of Education, but my son refused to be intimidated. Both my children are cast from the same mould, and don't react the way most would. They learned too through my experiences.

I: But there's a terrible irony there. You were fighting to expose the awful mistreatment of children and your own child suffers as a consequence.

R: That's another example of the dreadful cynicism Gwynedd County Council demonstrated. The Council knew when I was dismissed that my children would suffer, then let my son be victimised at school simply because he was my child.

I: Having been myself involved in a whistle blowing situation, albeit less dramatic, I found the book on whistle blowing in the social services extremely thought-provoking (Hunt, 1998). Why do we allow wicked behaviour to go on and on? What allows such behaviour to prevail? Why do supposedly good and benign organizations fail so often and so dreadfully in their responsibilities?

R: Institutional child abuse is closely connected to the way children in care are perceived, but has much wider social implications. These children lose their status as human beings, but the same happens to the elderly and to other groups who cease to be, or never were, economically useful. Modern Western society is very self-centred, without regard for the needy, who, viewed as both an economic and a social threat, are relentlessly marginalised. Children are, by definition, *always* a threat, because their existence renders the older generations biologically redundant. That fact is rarely acknowledged, but it informs our dealings with children; arguably, children in care, in their position at the bottom of the pecking order, bear the brunt of these primitive fears and frustrations.

The world is obsessed with economics and material progress, dominated by market forces, which are no more than a construct yet can bring a whole country to its knees. There's no room for ethics.

I: Not long before I left Australia, I was watching a repeat episode of 'Yes, Minister'. I was fascinated by the way people invent excuses for inertia, and how more and more people become involved as the excuses get more complex, resulting in total paralysis. Why do people, even when they're innocent of any wrongdoing, let themselves be persuaded to do nothing?

R: People have a fundamental fear of conflict. The veneer of civilisation is very thin, and in order to keep the peace, all human transactions are eased on their way by what you might call the oil of dishonesty. People would rather deny what is staring them in the face than mount a challenge, because although the end result is unpredictable, it's safe to assume it won't be pleasant. A quiet life is very desirable – I would have liked nothing more myself – so it's human nature to take the line of least resistance and ignore whatever is of no direct concern. People are also afraid of authority, and those with children in care are usually more cowed by,

indebted to, and dependent on, authority than the rest of us: hence, they have the weakest voice, something that exacerbates the plight of their children.

I: If children in general aren't very important, then these children are the offspring of the least important people in society.

R: They're right at the bottom of the heap, relegated to the almost sub-human status of 'underclass'. In Britain, we have little regard for children in any case, tending to view them rather like chattels. To some extent, the abuse meted out in care is simply part of the British tradition of beating children into submission.

I: In her book *Sex and Destiny*, Germaine Greer suggested that Western European society, in which I would include Australia, has the least time and least care for children in any historical sense.

R: I detect elements of this lack of respect – which I deplore - in my own behaviour as a parent, where I expect obedience simply because of the power of my position.

I: One of the interesting aspects of your story is the role of the media. In the book, the journalist Eileen Fairweather (1998) gives a telling account of not dissimilar circumstances, and she says nothing will change without a national policy to elevate the status of children and to recognise child protection as a national priority. Is that improbably optimistic?

R: It's certainly a distant goal. Eileen is one of those who suffered by being drawn into the child abuse issue. David Williams, the television producer, also saw his own career suffer, and other journalists have been pilloried for pursuing the matter.

The damage is ongoing: children are abused, then those who try to protect them and to expose the abusers are also damaged. The culture of suppression is very powerful, and undoubtedly tied to the inbred attitudes towards children prevalent in our capitalist society.

I: I've never regarded myself as a conspiracy theorist, but it's very difficult not to conclude that conspiracies were operating in north Wales. There was a great deal more organization amongst the abusers than amongst those supposed to protect the children.

R: The suggestion of paedophile rings has been put forward over and again, but I approach the matter from a different angle. There were several concentrations of children's homes in north Wales, and logically, they would attract concentrations of abusers, rather as bank robbers are drawn to banks and burglars to concentrations of valuable property. To me it's always been self-evident that vulnerable children will be a focus for abusers, who snatch at any opportunity to pursue their interests. The internet, for example, is now being described as a 'candy store' for paedophiles, and in America, the term 'chicken hawking' has been coined to describe the activities of abusers who trawl internet chat rooms in search of prey. All that aside, some of the abusers in the Wrexham area knew each other before moving to work there; others joined up, as it were, afterwards: like attracting like.

I: I have the impression they protected each other far more efficiently than did those with nothing to hide.

R: If one broke ranks, it would be very dangerous for the rest, and up to a point, the same considerations informed the conduct of the councils. A number of conspiracies undeniably took root at a later stage, particularly within Gwynedd County Council, because once people had failed to act on, or covered up, an allegation or incident of abuse, inevitably, the next allegation or incident that arose would also be covered up. As time progressed, and the tally of incidents mounted, more and more people would become involved in suppression, each with something to lose if knowledge of their negligence or ineptitude came to light. People will not admit to their mistakes, although a mistake should, in the ideal, be seen as a tool for learning. In north Wales, they were simply allowed to proliferate.

I: Before we commenced this recording, we discussed our mutual concern about the term 'whistle blowing', which has become fashionable. What are your own reservations?

R: I dislike labelling terminology of any kind, but this term trivialises the issue: this is not a football game, or a game of any kind, but something immensely serious. For me, my actions were dictated by conscience.

I: In the book (Taylor, 1998), you make some very powerful criticisms of social workers, to the point where it becomes a terrible indictment – in fact, I was thinking of setting a student essay around a quote from this. However, many of the people involved in the north Wales abuse case weren't social workers, but unqualified care workers, police and a whole range of others. Why are you so intensely critical of social workers?

R: By definition, social workers should be concerned with the welfare and safety of the people they're employed to supervise and assist. In my opinion, anyone entering the profession should be driven to address the inequalities that exist in society, but social workers seem content to pick up the pieces of inequitable social policy whilst bemoaning the fact that the pieces are there. The profession itself is not an active force in shaping social policy, even though it's uniquely placed to inform and lobby government on the real-life consequences of governmental activity: hence my comments on the moral vacuum at the heart of the profession. What, in effect, do social workers actually *do*? Beyond the practical, day to day nature of their activity, do they have any conception of what they do in the wider sense, of their impact on society, of their contribution to keeping people in need, of their true relationship to the society in which they function? Do they even perceive the need to consider these issues?

I: So you'd rather be an author than a social worker?

R: I don't define myself by my work. I used to do social work, now I write novels. In a few years time, I may well do something else.

I: In the book, Mike Cox (1998) suggests that whistle blowing should be a natural function of social work, and I tend to agree with him.

R: It should be, and paradoxically, if it were, there'd probably be far less need for it.

I: He argues that it should be a core activity in relation to an advocacy role for social workers and recognition of the vulnerability of some people. In that respect, what kept other social workers quiet amidst all this abuse?

R: As I said, people have a fundamental fear of conflict, and the social workers responded on that level. Fear of losing their jobs, of the dangers of partisanship with society's outcasts, over-rode professional considerations. It's not difficult to predict that the outcome of involvement in such issues will be deeply unpleasant, and my dismissal was very much an object lesson to the rest. People who act as I did are, in a way, socially delinquent, and not unreasonably, attract punishment for refusing to come to heel.

I: You suggested earlier that your social work training had actually made it harder, rather than easier, for you to take action.

R: Only later did I realise that conditioning was involved in the training, as well as in the work place; facing that fact wasn't pleasant. Understanding the *extent* of the conditioning was another nasty experience: where did I begin and conditioning end? How much had my personality been affected?

I: That's a terrible indictment of social work education, and of the profession, in that your education somehow made it harder for you to act as advocate and protector, two key roles of any social worker.

R: I think most social workers, asked to consider the point, would eventually reach the same conclusion. The unacknowledged impetus of social work is concerned with policing civilians on behalf of the state. Where a child presents a problem, social workers have a whole armoury of legislative and professional machinery at their disposal, and the primary goal is to stop the child being a problem. The child may well, and often does, have very good reasons for presenting 'problematic' behaviour, but the interventionists are not programmed to investigate the child's viewpoint, but to investigate the problem. Hence, the child quickly *becomes* the problem, and is dealt with on that basis, by some form of neutralisation. And in that sense, there are striking parallels with what happened to me when *I* became a problem.

I: Now, perhaps, that kind of management is even more likely because of financial constraints and the push towards short term intervention and a problem-solving approach, rather than an investigation of the underlying causes and antecedents of what is being presented.

R: Indeed. Let me digress a little, to illustrate the impact of such a mindset. When I was working, I had little time or mental energy for my own interests. Afterwards, I rediscovered many old enthusiasms, including an interest in music – particularly Beethoven's, which had always been a source of genuine fascination. Some years ago, I began quite serious research – into the man, his creative output, and his period, using professional perspectives, knowledge and experience to aid investigation.

Beethoven was a battered child. His father, Johann, was a drunk, and his mother was cowed by her husband, poverty and ill-health. When Beethoven was born in 1770, Mozart as a child prodigy was still fresh in memory, tempting other parents to push their children in the same direction, in pursuit of the wealth and glory that had found their way into the Mozart household. Beethoven showed an early interest in music, but his father and grandfather were both musicians, and music-making was, in any case, a common activity in most households. Johann literally tried to force his young son to follow in Mozart's footsteps; there are contemporary reports of the three-year-old Beethoven being made to stay up all night at the harpsichord, of his being locked in the cellar and beaten mercilessly when he resisted.

Miraculously, Beethoven's early experiences did not destroy his creative impulse, but between the ages of 3 to 16, he displayed quite disruptive behaviour, and he remained a renegade to the end of his life. Johann's drinking became of such concern to his employer, the Electoral Court in Bonn, that they agreed to a petition from the 12-year-old Beethoven for half his father's salary to be paid to him, so that some money at least found its way into the family. Bonn was then a small town, where wealthier families felt a social obligation towards the disadvantaged. The Fischer family probably saved Beethoven and his brothers from the worst excesses of his own family, and Beethoven remained grateful to them all his life.

But how would Beethoven have fared in this day and age, with his drunken father and sickly, inadequate mother; his disruptive behaviour and non-school attendance? Social workers would doubtless place him in care, where he would be expected to conform and to 'earn' his way back into the community. But conformity was beyond him – that's patently apparent in his music, and part of its uniqueness – so he would probably become involved in genuinely anti-social behaviour. Many of the adult offenders I worked with appeared to have a creative instinct; either they could not recognise it, and it therefore turned in on itself, pushing them towards anti-social behaviour, or they could find no legitimate outlet, and it thus became dangerously frustrated.

I: There are parallels in the way we measure intelligence with IQ tests and examinations, in that such tools only measure a particular kind of intelligence in a particular kind of way.

R: We define intelligence by the ability to learn and to memorise facts, completely discounting imagination.

I: And ignoring emotional intelligence, emotional maturity, and creativity.

R: Like all children, I was to an extent a product of my environment. The Celts prize the imagination, and to me, it was part of my being. I was also encouraged to be both curious about everything and to question everything, so I grew up with something of an armoury of mental and psychological equipment at my disposal, which inevitably shaped the way I function. Others aren't so fortunate.

I: Would Beethoven have survived the north Wales children's homes?

R: I imagine he would first resist, and then abscond, and very quickly, be caught in the downward spiral of attracting ever-more draconian reprisal for his refusal to conform. His

enormous gifts would at best be neutralised, but more probably, completely destroyed; conformity often entails the complete destruction of individuality.

I: The second half of the book (Hunt, 1998) examines procedures and how they might be improved. Can procedures themselves ever be enough to safeguard children from abuse?

R: Society's attitudes become concentrated within professions like social work, and although professional procedures have an essential role as a mechanism, they must be tied to a fundamental change in our attitudes towards children, which currently present an enormous stumbling-block in the path of real progress. Nefyn Dodd often told children that they deserved nothing, apart from punishment and hardship, until they submitted to his dictates, and he was not alone in his attitudes. Children in the care of Gwynedd County Council had very poor facilities, poor food, and poor accommodation, because it was felt anything else might give them the wrong impression, and create unrealistic, and unearned, expectation.

What perturbs me so much about the social work profession and its activities is the fact that all the dreadful disasters befalling children and other vulnerable people happen at the hands of social workers, in the presence of social workers, or under the protection of social workers. We accept that child abuse occurs in the home, and that, like marital abuse, it crosses all class and income boundaries, but we reject the idea that it occurs in care. We assume, wrongly, that surrounding children with the legal protection of the state renders them safe.

I: In Gwynedd County Council, Nefyn Dodd was in charge of procedures, yet simultaneously, abusing children: that's a horrible irony. From another perspective, when children die despite child protection intervention, the ensuing inquiries inevitably blame inadequate procedures, or failure to comply with existing procedures. I agree we need to identify and understand the factors and issues underlying intervention, and investigate why, when any number of individuals and agencies might be involved, a child can still die. Do we not care enough about the outcome of intervention, or, more alarmingly, is there almost a casualness about human life itself?

R: Social work must somehow validate itself as a profession; surrounding itself with documented procedures is one way of achieving that goal, specious though the reality is.

People who require social work intervention, whether children or adults, are judged inadequate, and to society, have little value; consequently, where such inequality is rife, their despair is their own fault, and their deaths are less important, less of a loss.

Social work abounds with judgemental procedures. One of my principal activities involved assessment, using what appeared to be very formal, structured and empirically-determined procedures to assess children's needs and to plan for the future. Now, I fear I was perpetrating fiction. Publishers, critics and readers say the characters in my novels are so real that they must be based on living people, yet they're only figments of my imagination, constructed from my experience of human beings in general and given various physical attributes. Social workers may well create similar fictions, which are validated by written procedures, like those I used in assessing children. Based on theories that at best were open to various interpretations, and at worst, had been discredited, they were applied by rote, yet, in the belief that they were able to provide scientific dissection of a personality, allowed us to make far-reaching decisions about the theory which must be applied next in order to neutralise the problem.

I: There are parallels here with what happened at Bristol Royal Infirmary, where some 40 children died during surgery.

R: I understand many of the children were unfit for surgery, and were bound to die during the operation: nonetheless, the surgeons went ahead. Perhaps they hoped to learn something that might save future lives; perhaps they were merely experimenting, which the medical profession must do in order to advance knowledge, on children whose life prospects were already seriously compromised.

I: The Bristol whistle blower, an anaesthetist, found himself unemployable in Britain. He's now working in Australia, outside Melbourne.

R: Given what he did, he's lucky to have found employment anywhere.

Professions always want to cover up mistakes, but in medicine, for instance, physical evidence of intervention usually remains. Alongside that is an awareness, both inside and outside the profession, of what the profession is supposed to do and not to do. Social work is very different: physical evidence is mostly absent, but if, for example, available in the form of a child whose behaviour is progressively deteriorating, the child's inherent depravity takes the blame. The general public is unclear about what social workers do, and that lack of clarity and purpose pervades the profession. When social workers encounter bad practice, they may not recognise it as such; if they do, they may well be impotent. Medicine has both moral architecture and an ethical manifesto, but social work has neither.

I: That's a very pessimistic view.

R: I'd prefer to say realistic. We've allowed the social work profession to become what it is because life is easier for the rest of us when others handle the burdens of the elderly, the needy and delinquent children, the mentally and physically handicapped, and the mentally ill. But without sound ethical underpinnings, social work activity will remain characterised by chronic and debilitating confusion, and even the best training will be no more than a superficiality.

I: Is public interest disclosure legislation likely to make a difference?

R: That will apply to employment across the board, and should prevent employees from being victimised. However, whether social workers will be encouraged to make disclosures is another issue, and one which depends on their ability to recognise and to understand when disclosure is warranted and necessary.

I: Arguments and doubts lie at the heart of all disciplines and professions.

R: But how we deal with them depends on motivation.

I: What could have been done that might have reduced some of the anguish experienced by those already damaged and deprived children in north Wales?

R: Social work needs to be subjected to independent monitoring, and to inspection by people who are not caught in situations of vested interest or allegiances to the organizations they monitor. The guardian ad litem service could provide a partial model for monitoring children's services: children in care need access to people whose primary concerns are child welfare, and who can act as advocate, if necessary, against the organization with control over the child. Social workers can't fulfil this role because their loyalties become immediately divided at the point of conflict.

I: You're suggesting a system of children's rights officers and independent reviews that take into account the experiences of children themselves. I was impressed with the way the Tribunal interviewed a random sample of some 600 people who'd been through the care system, in order to get a picture of that system. The fact that such feedback isn't sought as a matter of course shows an extraordinary lack of care.

R: Although it's an obvious mechanism for assessing the quality and effectiveness of social work service, seeking the views of people on the receiving end is a very radical notion. Moves are being made in that direction, but I suspect that the perceived inferior status of the clients, which renders their opinions worthless, will persist. It is also very tempting for the profession to dismiss adverse comment from clients as symptomatic of innate anti-social attitudes.

Social work activity contains the client within the profession, and the belief that social work equates with welfare presumes that the client's best interests are being served. Underlying this is the belief that the profession knows best, so the need for client feedback on interventions is dismissed. Similarly, the success and failure rates of interventions are not examined.

During my professional training, I undertook a three-month placement at Bryn Estyn, which until implementation of the 1969 Children and Young Persons Act had been an approved school for boys. Legislative change, and a change of name from 'approved school' to community home with education, did little to improve attitudes: it remained a 'hard' place, where boys went for punishment. Of all the institutions investigated by the Tribunal, Bryn Estyn had the worst record of abuse and abusive practices.

Whilst there, I researched the preceding placements and social work interventions of some 50% of boys then in residence, ranging in age from 11 to 17. Some had a history of offending, others were in care because of family problems, the death of a parent, or non-school attendance.

Acquiring information about previous interventions was almost impossible because of the paucity of records. The abysmal quality of record-keeping featured repeatedly at the Tribunal: in some cases, although a child had been in care for many years, records would amount to no more, perhaps, than a few pages. There were huge gaps in the recording of movements and residential placements, and this is extremely significant: in the absence of precise records, an abused child is unable to prove their whereabouts at a particular time, and to prove that their presence at a particular institution coincided with the presence there of the alleged abuser. The growing backlash movement claiming that virtually no abuse took place in north Wales, and that the majority of allegations are malicious and made for financial gain, has fastened on to this particular factor as 'proof' that those alleging abuse are lying.

By carefully questioning the boys themselves, I was eventually able to assess the extent of interventions preceding admission to Bryn Estyn, finding an average of perhaps 15 separate and identifiable interventions, including supervision orders, foster placements and admissions to other residential establishments. Worryingly, many of the boys had a very negligible or non-existent offending record, which should have completely precluded their placement in a former approved school. Most tellingly, where previous placements had failed, the child was saddled automatically with all the blame; social workers made no attempt to examine the suitability of the placement, or to look for contributing factors elsewhere than in the child. Hence, the child unjustly acquired an ever-worsening reputation for intractability, which was used to validate harsher management.

For many years, fostering has been promoted as the preferred placement option, and this caused residential units to be systematically run down. I have considerable reservations about fostering, and believe much of its attraction lies in the low relative cost; what children have told me about their experiences in foster care has increased those reservations.

Some foster placements work well, and provide children with real love and stability, but they are few and far between; this is not surprising, given that successful fostering entails opening up one's family to the child of a total stranger, and absorbing that child into the family on equal terms.

Many foster children find themselves at the bottom of the family heap, relegated by the adults, and bullied by foster siblings, who, quite naturally, perceive the child as a threatening intruder. The intentions of most foster parents are completely honourable, but some may not realise the implications of fostering until after the event, when they discover their inability to cope with the emotional and familial cost of the exercise. I have also heard of cases where people took in a foster child to provide a focus for a failing marriage.

Social workers are loath to investigate foster placement failures too deeply for fear of discovering that their initial assessments were misguided, and consequently, of being unable to use the resource; it is tempting, and too easy, to blame the child for the breakdown.

Children are abused in foster placements: 'Mary' is a case in point. She had been in care since infancy, passed from one placement to another like a parcel. At the age of 11, she was said to be exhibiting 'dangerously inappropriate sexual behaviour', and sent to a mixed community home for assessment. She was handicapped by her fragmented

background, her completely understandable reluctance to develop relationships, a below average IQ, and her terrible reputation: allegedly, she was liable to make indiscriminate sexual advances to child and adult, male and female. Gradually, it emerged that this reputation, which was being purveyed as absolute truth by social workers, managers and psychologists, rested on the flimsiest of evidence: some three years earlier, Mary's then foster mother demanded her immediate removal on the grounds that she'd been seen masturbating the family's pet bitch.

The social services department clearly expected the assessment process to recommend a secure and even isolated placement, but months into the assessment, Mary continued failing to live up to her reputation, despite an unprecedented level of supervision and observation: she functioned as much like an average 11-year-old as it was possible for a child with her miserable background.

The last set of foster parents had reported that she regularly rubbed her own genitals: she was therefore examined by a paediatrician to ensure that she was healthy; subsequently, it was suggested that she had perhaps focused on her genitals only because others were so doing.

By this time, Mary had developed several close relationships with staff and children at the community home, and at school, and because she was now settled, the social services department was convinced her 'inappropriate' behaviour was bound to manifest itself. Instead, Mary's new found confidence enabled her to disclose to a staff member that she had been sexually abused by the adult son of the foster family where she had allegedly masturbated the dog. Her version of that incident was far more credible: she said she was rubbing the animal's belly.

Mary had told her foster mother that she intended to report the sexual abuse: *that* is what precipitated her move. She was as good as her word, but despite that, the social services department continued placing children with these foster parents, whilst actually creating a mantle of blame to throw around the child's shoulders. When challenged, the social services department claimed the foster home was a scare resource that must be protected.

Cases like Mary's only confirm my belief that a moral vacuum lies at the heart of the profession: the deliberate damage done to that child was incalculable.

I: It's absolutely appalling. Faced with similar circumstances, the average person would have no hesitation about reporting matters to the police, instead of engaging in a cover-up.

Mary's case is a really metaphor for the whole of child sexual abuse. There was a belief for a long time, which still exists in many circles, that a child is sexually precocious because of his or her own needs and problems and not as a response to sexual abuse: yet another fallacious example of the problem residing solely in the child and having no connection with someone else's actions.

R: I was extremely dubious whenever I came across children with a terrible social work record attached to them, but other social workers seemed happy to accept what they were told. There's no impetus to investigate, yet perhaps 50% of children in care, maybe more, have a reputation they've done nothing to deserve but which will haunt them for the rest of their lives.

I: In other words, a label.

R: Aside from abuse, underlying physical conditions and illnesses can affect a child's behaviour and functioning: for example, dyslexia; dyspraxia; undiagnosed epilepsy; head injury; yet social workers are not taught to eliminate all possible physiological factors before embarking on intervention. Interestingly, the medical profession is now recognising that brittle bone syndrome in young children has been, in a number of cases, misdiagnosed as non-accidental injury.

I: Is there any room for optimism?

R: Yes, because there's always room for change. After my dismissal, I felt fairly hopeless, but in the end, persistence pays off. Provided the impetus remains to change for the better, the situation and prospects for children in care should improve over time.

I: And hopefully, after the North Wales Tribunal, it will be easier for children to complain about abuse and ill-treatment, and for their stories to be heard and believed.

R: And being cynical, if some of the young people abused in care in north Wales manage to obtain fairly substantial damages, in future, councils might well be frightened into providing a better service. The councils' insurers have already played a part in the north Wales saga; perhaps it's time their role became more positive. □

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