

Child Sexual Abuse and Cleveland: Further Lessons to be Learned

Chris Goddard in interview with Kieran O'Hagan,
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This article concludes my interview with the established social work writer and practitioner, Kieran O'Hagan, who visited Australia recently. Kieran's most recent book *Working with Child Sexual Abuse*, examines child sexual abuse after Cleveland.

C. G. One irony of the Cleveland affair appeared to me to be that after 30 or so inquiries into child deaths (e.g. Maria Colwell, Kimberley Carlile, Tyra Henry) which were critical of social workers for failing to protect children and leaving them too long in dangerous situations, the Butler-Sloss inquiry into Cleveland was critical of social workers for removing children too quickly. In spite of this apparent difference, there seem to be many areas in common in the Cleveland inquiry and the other inquiries in Britain. Do you believe this to be the case?

K. O'H. It is certainly the case, Chris. There is a mistaken view that Cleveland is entirely different from previous inquiry reports, because, first of all, it is nothing to do with the murder of individual children, but it is about what happened to 165 children admitted to hospital, diagnosed as sexually abused. There are, in fact, many themes in common amongst all the preceding reports and the Cleveland report itself. If I can mention some of those.

Another theme... which is very important, is that in Cleveland there was virtually no contact whatsoever between the social workers and the alleged male perpetrators.

The one that comes immediately to mind, that management in all of the previous child abuse reports, and very much in the Cleveland report, was seen to be inept to a frightening degree. Inept, incompetent, negligent, and they were heavily criticised in all those previous reports, and in the Cleveland report itself.

Another theme I referred to briefly earlier

on, which is very important, is that in Cleveland there was virtually no contact whatsoever between the social workers and the alleged male perpetrators. This is a feature, a very conspicuous feature, in all the previous reports. The marked reluctance of social workers to engage male perpetrators. It is significant that in the physical abuse cases of the earlier reports, and the sexual abuse of Cleveland, the social workers showed the same marked reluctance to engage or have anything to do with the perpetrators.

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Another factor, in all the reports and in the Cleveland report, when children were removed from home, the relationship between natural parents and foster parents was very often a bad relationship and this is often a disastrous state of affairs. I personally believe, my experience tells me, that if this relationship between natural parents and foster parents is not a good relationship then the child being cared for by the foster parents will pick that up, will sense that these people caring for him or her now do not like his or her parents, and that is very negative for the child.

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It is crucially important, irrespective of the abuse to which the child has been subjected, that the foster parents and the natural parents have plenty of contact, that they get on well together. The vast majority of foster placements in Britain that break down, they break down not because the child is difficult to care for, they break down because of the bad relationships that develop between foster parents and natural parents and this eventually makes the case unmanageable.

Finally, another similar feature was the fact that in the previous cases, the reports revealed that often children were not listened to by the professionals, often they were saying or giving indicators that they were being abused and these were not picked up by the social workers.

In Cleveland, that worked both ways. There were children who were being sexually abused, but also there were children who were not being sexually abused, and saying so quite openly and loudly. They were not listened to. So this principle is vitally important: whether we are dealing with child physical abuse or child sexual abuse, we have got to listen to what the children are saying.

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C. G. The Cleveland inquiry reported that so many important relationships, for example between social workers and the police, and between doctors and the police, had broken down, or had distorted, for example between the social workers and the doctors. Is the much-vaunted co-operation and co-ordination of multi-disciplinary work ever possible?

K. O'H. I think we have to look at the history here of multi-disciplinary work. The Maria Colwell Report (1974) was the first report to attach enormous importance to multi-disciplinary contributions to the case conference. In reality, many of the individuals involved, many of the professionals involved, actually do find it very difficult to make this contribution. They are so immersed in their own work.

The best example is that of G.P.'s, who rarely, if ever, attend case conferences. They will say: "Look, my surgery is full of patients every day of the week, I just can't afford to be going to case conferences every two weeks". Similarly, there are varying levels of contribution made by the professionals. Some are very good, they make every effort to attend. The police attend all our case conferences.

The schools, the probation service, do not always attend. There are varying levels of consistency in this multi-disciplinary co-operation.

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We have to accept that reality, that it may be difficult for all these professionals to be working together, consistently, all the time, in respect of particular children. We should accept that it is going to be very difficult. But, having said that, we must accept the necessity that in much child abuse work, and particularly in child sexual abuse work, the multi-disciplinary approach is *absolutely* vital. The two agencies that come to mind are the police and social services. Social workers have a great deal to learn from the police. The police have a great deal to learn from social workers. It was a great tragedy in Cleveland the great animosity that developed between these two agencies. I think this has lessons for Australia, and for Victoria in particular. It is vital that they work together because they both have so much to contribute.

C. G. You are very critical of the research into child sexual abuse. What are the problems and what needs to be done?

K. O'H. I am not a researcher, so I am not answering this question with any experience of research but I have studied much of the research used to underpin the child sexual abuse crusade in England in 1986 and 1987, and I found that research hopelessly flawed in so many respects.

One of the problems that immediately comes to mind, and which I think I have made some contribution towards solving, was the total lack of categorisation of child sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse was a blanket term used to cover every conceivable child sexual abuse act. It just doesn't make sense to look at all categories of child sexual abuse in the same way – they are so different. They are different in so many respects – in respect of the seriousness, in terms of damage done to the child, in terms of the context of the abuse. All of those issues and areas need to be looked at, and we've got to be both categorising and prioritising in terms of those areas.

For example, the research that I referred to earlier, the questionnaires used for much of that research allowed the respondents themselves to define child sexual abuse in their own terms – any kind of action that was sexual abuse to them. This gave child sexual abuse an unlimited quality, in which virtually anything at all could be interpreted

as child sexual abuse.

I think it was very unfortunate that categories of sexual abuse like that could all be lumped together to produce figures of prevalence of sexual abuse. In order to produce accurate, realistic, meaningful figures of the prevalence of child sexual abuse you have to have an adequate and tight definition. I also think that you have to categorise and that you have to establish those categories from the word go. You should be asking people, okay, what did happen to them and you should be – I would have thought a researcher must, by definition, be doing this – fitting this into particular categories.

One of the reasons why researchers haven't identified that particular group is that they haven't yet learned the ways of communicating with that group.

For example, there will be a category of soliciting that is, individuals who are approaching children, asking or seeking or trying to get sexual abuse but not actually achieving it. So, that might be one category. Then you can move on to another category of inappropriate touching for example and ensuring once again that that is what respondents are talking about, and nothing else. There may be then a category of bodily contact between the perpetrator and the abused child. Only by a rigorous approach like that, and a rigorous categorisation from the word go, that we will begin some accurate understanding and comprehension of the extent of child sexual abuse as it is being perpetrated. There are lots and lots of other flaws with the research.

There is no doubt that there are less punitive responses for perpetrators for violence within the home

One that I would like to draw attention to is that researchers have been entirely wrong in trying to identify the children most at risk. There is a good deal of consistency in the research, something approximate to: children, aged between 10 and 12; children who have had difficult relationships with mother; children whose parents have possibly been sexually abused themselves. Now I, in my experience, have identified another group of children that I feel to be at much greater risk. Children who are much, much younger, and children who have suffered some kind of permanent handicap, either physical or mental. I have good reason to think from my own experiences that that is a much higher risk category. One of the reasons why researchers haven't identified that particular group is that they haven't yet

learned the ways of communicating with that group. The groups that they have communicated with so often have been articulate, educated individuals, frequently university students.

This has always been the prime area for researchers. That cannot be representative of nations as a whole.

C. G. One of my concerns in child abuse has long been that child abuse and child sexual abuse are rarely prosecuted as crimes, and rarely successfully prosecuted at that. Gelles, the American sociologist, argues that people abuse family members because they can get away with it. The rewards for using violence and power are there, both inside and outside the family, for example, inflicting pain, changing another's behaviour and having power over another, but if we use such behaviour against people outside the family, our workmates or friends or neighbours, the cost are too high: we will be prosecuted, end up in court and perhaps lose our jobs, or money or our liberty. What are your views?

K. O'H. I wholeheartedly agree with Gelles and the point that he is making. There is no doubt that there are less punitive responses for perpetrators for violence within the home, in families. This is a major problem in England, as it is in the States and Australia. A small note that I would just like to make, however. In my travels around Victoria, I have picked up many anecdotes and cases that people have told me about where it seems that this particular problem is predominant in Victoria, to an extent that can only be very serious for the children who are being battered, being sexually abused. The perpetrators appear to be getting off scot-free. It appears that Victoria might be lagging behind somewhat the responses to perpetrators in England and the States ...

You asked how I feel about this. Unfortunately, unless society, individuals and families, realise that just because these offences are committed against children in their own homes, it doesn't mean that it won't touch them. It does, it will affect them. Just because it is happening out there, it is silent, it is invisible, doesn't mean that it doesn't touch other people's lives, affect others and their quality of life. Child abuse happens on a massive scale and the consequences are so often disastrous, in terms of the emotional and educational life of those abused children. They grow up being greatly impaired in many, many ways.

the possibly disastrous consequences of an intervention that is not clearly formulated and carefully prepared.

They so often lead lives which then have an

effect upon us in different ways. They grow up to be damaged adolescents, damaged adults ... We delude ourselves if we believe that because it is happening in families, behind closed doors, that that will not affect the quality of our lives.

C. G. Although I found *Working With Child Sexual Abuse* stimulating, I was concerned at some sections. The case of 'Patricia', for example. 'Patricia' is a fifteen-year-old who is repeatedly sexually abused by her father. The sexual abuse has graduated to full intercourse, and yet, because the family otherwise provides her with love and security, and in spite of the fact that a serious crime is involved, you seem to be saying leave the case alone. I was unhappy at this. Can you comment?

such was the nature of these cases... that to stop it, to put an end to it, immediately led to crises that were, in fact, far worse than the crisis of abuse.

K. O'H. The question is very pertinent and I touched upon a case like that in the class I gave for you this morning. Firstly, I must say that I believe, and believe passionately, that sexual abuse is an evil. We must stop it at all costs, intervene to stop it at all costs. But I also believe we must be hyper-sensitive to *all* of the consequences of intervention. That particular case history, and the hypothesis that I was putting across in that particular case, actually stemmed from my own personal experiences of cases in England.

To get back to categorisation, that case falls into a particular category. The category is that of an adolescent girl being sexually abused by her father. An incestuous relationship. A vile, disgusting kind of abuse. An evil. That is one side of it. The other side of it is that the family itself, and the dynamics of the family, and so many functions of the family, or dysfunctions of the family, actually revolve around that sexual abuse. The sexual abuse is pivotal to the functioning or malfunctioning of the family.

Now what I wanted to draw attention to there, in that case, was the possibly disastrous consequences of an intervention that is not clearly formulated and carefully prepared. I quoted in my book, similar cases of teenage girls being sexually abused by their fathers, the agencies intervened, and the consequences were eight deaths in an area of approximately 30 kilometers radius from my town. Within that radius there were eight deaths as a result of the way agencies intervened. They had a moral obligation to intervene, a statutory obligation to intervene, a professional obligation to intervene to stop the abuse. But, such was the nature of these cases, so typical was the abuse, that to stop

it, to put an end to it, immediately led to crises that were, in fact, far worse than the crisis of abuse. In one case, that I recall very well, of a twelve year old girl being sexually abused by her father, when the agencies found out and immediately intervened, the father responded to the intervention, to the child being removed, by getting a knife, a very long knife, and he hacked his wife to death. He then went looking for the social worker, he also went looking for the child. Luckily, we had the child protected and he didn't find her. Then he went to a local beauty spot and hung himself.

Now if alleged perpetrators decide to kill themselves, well that's sad, that's tragic. But that isn't my main concern. My main concern is that the perpetrators, exposed in cases like this, with a teenager with whom they have been having a long-term relationship, and everything else in the family pivots around that relationship, that if there is the threat of exposure, they may well decide to take the child with them. I believe that this is a common, common feeling on behalf of perpetrators. Not all of them carry it out, but I feel the threat of shame, stigma, exposure, jail, can be too much. They may decide to kill themselves, that is quite common. There were two alleged perpetrators in Cleveland who did so.

The most difficult part is to be learning the skills, the techniques, the approaches, the attitudes necessary for engaging the parents of sexually abused children.

What I was concerned about in that case, the case of 'Patricia', was that the perpetrator may have decided to take his family with him, when he killed himself. In another case in Leeds, the perpetrator, he killed his wife, he killed the step-daughter with whom he had been having a long-term sexual relationship, and he somehow managed to kill himself and set fire to the home.

All I'm saying, and I think I remember the particular phrase in that case, if you are going to intervene, then for heaven's sake take care, get the child out and protect that child, and protect the mother.

Protect the mother as well because the reality is that there are too many corpses lying around back home in England in that particular kind of case.

C. G. Are there any important areas that you feel you haven't had the opportunity to cover in this interview?

K. O'H. Perhaps I can say something briefly about training and preparation for work in the child sexual abuse area. Many social workers were well prepared in terms of communicating with the child, how to get disclosures. That is the easiest part. The most difficult part is to be learning the skills,

the techniques, the approaches, the attitudes necessary for engaging the parents of sexually abused children. In the case of a male perpetrator, father, step-father in the family, the major task is how to isolate that perpetrator and how to get the non-abusing mother on to the side of the abused child. That has to be the way forward. That has to be what practitioners, trainers, managers, supervisors have to address in the years ahead.

C. G. Thank you very much Kieran for your time.

K. O'H. Thank you Chris. My pleasure, my pleasure.

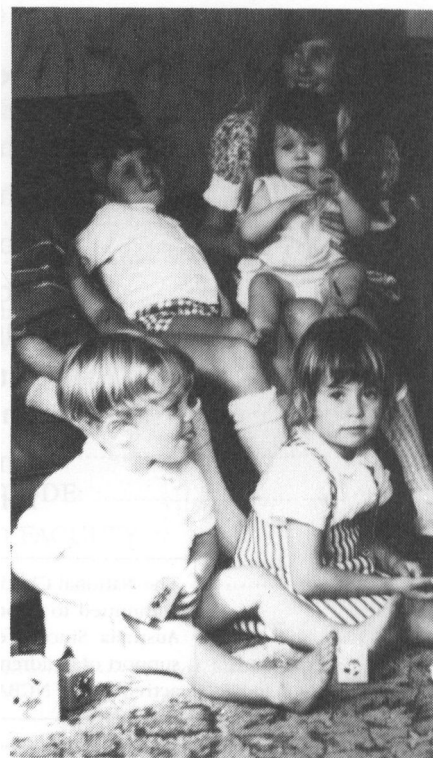
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