THE RIGHT TO QUIET ENJOYMENT of FAMILY LIFE.

One of the most basic of human rights is the right to quiet enjoyment of family life. This right is enshrined in European Human Rights Legislation by which our Government is bound and to which our Government notionally pays homage. It is a right that is being repeatedly breached with regard to families who have special needs children.

A local healthcare professional came into my home earlier this week to assess an aspect of my son's development. She asked about schooling and I named a local independent unit for Dyslexic pupils where he has received much help. She smiled and told of the help this same unit had given to her own son: “Until he went there and received help everyone was regarding my concern as neurotic behaviour.”

I have worked in senior front line positions in Voluntary Sector children's provision in the UK. Nevertheless, three years ago, both of my children were (briefly) put onto the Child Protection (At Risk) Register for fear that I was causing “significant harm” to my son by asking that he be formally assessed for ADD/ADHD/Asperger's Syndrome and by taking the LEA to SEN Tribunal. The grounds were that a former GP had started a “whispering campaign” amongst health and educational professionals who did not understand Autism / Asperger's Syndrome / Dyslexia / Dyspraxia and related conditions – always preferring to suspect and blame the mother.

The lasting damage of the Social Work intrusion into our lives is much greater for my daughter, who was only 5 at the time. She was previously an extremely independent young lady who, faced with the fear of being taken from me, became extremely clingy and afraid to sleep without me. I still can't easily go out on a school night as she forces herself to stay awake for my return. Her education was undermined by the intrusion, which caused enormous difficulties in relationships with her school. Low teacher expectation of the “CP kid” led to massive and totally unfair delay in her getting help with her Dyslexia. (* 1)

Eventually at the age of 12 my Dyslexic son was diagnosed as high functioning Autism or Asperger's Syndrome (DAMP – Disorders of Attention, Motor control & Perception). In the wake of complex pneumonia he also developed some of the symptoms of ME/CFS. His main difficulty is that he is extremely bright – and uses his intelligence to mask his difficulties. Education professionals (led on by the whispers from the GP) had mistaken his educational difficulties for lesser intelligence. I had identified that something was wrong when he was 3 and the whispering campaign had persisted for 9 years. Misapprehensions by some personnel in the LEA still make it difficult for him to get appropriate educational help.

I became very depressed by the attacks on our family and thought that this was something unique which had beset us, until I heard the psychologist and author Lisa Blakemore Brown speaking on "Woman's Hour" about the "first gossamer breath of suspicion" and about all the families similarly afflicted which she and others had been trying to support.

My family's trauma at the hands of Social Services, linked with my former political and children's work experiences, made me determined to fight. I eventually made contact with Lisa and with Charles Pragnell. Charles is a Social Work Consultant who was involved with the Butler Sloss Cleveland Inquiry and has helped many families wrongfully accused of harming their sick or disabled children. We made contact with the Earl Howe and found that there was considerable political awareness and support for families wrongly accused in this way. We met with senior officials at the Department of Health and briefed Peers prior to a debate, on October 17 2001, in the House of Lords – led by the Earl Howe and Lord Tim Clement Jones CBE. There were many other highly significant speeches – most notably from the Countess of Mar on the subject of children with ME/CFS and Lord JJ Astor of Hever on ADHD & Autism. (You can read the debate online in Hansard.)

There is now an all-party Parliamentary (Lords and Commons) Group considering false allegations of all kinds. The Chair is Claire Curtis-Thomas MP. I hope that they will be taking evidence from parents of children with illness and or disability in the first half of 2003. The Government don't understand but several very senior politicians do understand and will act when they are able to do so. If anything like this has happened to you or to someone you know please write to your MP and copy significant letters to relevant front bench spokespersons of all parties in both chambers and / or to the all-party Parliamentary Group. (Our local MP and a senior local councillor were instrumental in removing our children's names from the CP register.)

In a very recent case in the European Court of Human Rights (P, C & S v UK Application No 56547/00 16.7.2002) the UK was taken to task for breaking up a family, by removing at birth a baby daughter from her parents on flimsy evidence and without attempting to keep the family together or to train the parents to cope. The Court ruled that the UK had violated both the child's and parents' human rights under Article 6 (right to a fair trial) and 8 (right to respect for family life). The UK will now have to tread much more carefully in similar cases. The concern in this case was that the mother might have Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy, where the mother is thought to be seeking attention for herself by harming her child. MSBP is claimed to be a paediatric condition in the U.K. and can only be diagnosed by consultant paediatricians. In the U.S.A. a small number of psychiatrists claim it is a mental illness although it has no formal status as such. The "diagnosis" is subject to a high degree of controversy in the medical profession and is not generally accepted within the medical community. Despite such controversies it is all too often "diagnosed" wrongfully by those who are not qualified, trained or experienced to make such a "diagnosis" e.g.: Education Social Workers, Educational

Psychologists, GPs and a whole host of others who want to get a mother (who is probably time consuming and is requesting potentially expensive services for her sick or disabled child) out of their way.

At the time of the Lords Debate last October, a new organisation was formed to attempt to research and highlight the plight of families with sick and disabled children, whose right to quiet enjoyment of family life and whose children's access to appropriate services is disrupted by wrongful accusation and wasteful, inappropriate Social Work intrusion. (*2) Personal and family difficulties have prevented me from developing the organisation as quickly as I had hoped. There is a very real and urgent need for progress. I know of dozens of families where Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, Epilepsy, Diabetes, ME/CFS and a whole host of other problems of childhood illness or developmental delay have led to false accusations of child abuse. Some children are in care, some even adopted, many are on CP registers and many others are denied essential services. It is a very real problem ignored by the Government on the grounds that they have to protect children from all forms of abuse – except abuse by the professionals who should be trained to understand and to help.

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(*1) "It has been shown by several researchers e.g. Wexler.R. / Wakefield and Underwager etc., that Child Protection investigations, particularly where the accusations are false, cause serious and significant harm to children and their families. Such harm can take several forms and can seriously affect a child's emotional, intellectual, and social functioning. Wakefield and Underwager state in a Research Paper in 1995 that, "Although the damage to a falsely accused person is obvious, it is not fully realised that a child is also damaged by a false allegation and a mistaken decision. If a child is involved in allegations of abuse that are ill founded and erroneous, it is not an innocuous, neutral, or benign experience. A child involved in a false accusation of abuse is subjected to highly destructive emotional abuse. The harm done to children when adults make a mistake... is severe and long-lasting." (Charles Pragnell)

(*2) "There is case evidence from several parts of the U.K. that some local authorities are failing to assess the needs of disabled children because this would incur the provision of services to meet those needs, or are failing to provide the necessary services after assessment, and to prevent further pressure from parents are wrongfully referring disabled children to the child protection procedures." (Charles Pragnell)