

Yorkshire Post, 01 July 2003

## **Parents demand abuse inquiry**

PARENTS whose children have been taken away from them after they were accused of child abuse yesterday called for a full public inquiry and reform of the family court system.

Angry mothers and fathers protested outside the High Court in London in a demonstration which follows the high profile cases of Sally Clark, who was cleared on appeal of killing her two children, and Trupti Patel, who was found not guilty of killing her three babies.

Among the targets of their criticism was Professor Sir Roy Meadow, the former head of paediatrics at St James's Hospital in Leeds, whose expert evidence in a number of high-profile cases has come under fire. Many of the parents, some of whom wore blue ribbon gags to symbolise their own inability to speak out, held banners saying "Innocent until proven guilty" and posed in front of pictures of their children whose faces had been covered to protect their identities.

Among those protesting was Terry Cannings, whose wife Angela was convicted of murdering two of their children last year. A campaign has been launched by the 40-year-old's supporters and an appeal has been lodged.

"Every day since she was convicted has been a misery. Angela has lost control of her life and I have lost control of my life," Mr Cannings said.

Penny Mellor, who organised the demonstration, called for a "full, immediate public inquiry" into all aspects of child abuse and the family court system.

She said there was too much secrecy surrounding the family courts, and parents were gagged.

Many of the protesters were angry about the use of expert witnesses in family court cases where their testimony alone meant that children were put in foster homes and adopted even though the parents had never been charged with abuse.

Sir Roy was criticised in the cases of Mrs Clark and Mrs Patel and he was also involved in the cases of other parents at the demonstration.

Solicitor Mrs Clark, 36, of Wilmslow, Cheshire, was freed from prison earlier this year after the Appeal Court overturned her murder conviction and sentence over the death of her two babies. Mrs Patel, 35, of Maidenhead, was last month cleared of murdering her three babies.

Among the parents at the protest were a couple from Birmingham whose baby daughter was taken away from them after the death of their baby son.

"Karen", whose real name cannot be revealed, said her life had been "ripped apart" after evidence presented by experts including Sir Roy led to her daughter eventually being formally adopted.

The 37-year-old's baby son died at 17-and-a-half weeks after he was taken to hospital with breathing difficulties. Twelve months later the couple were called to a child protection conference, by which time Karen was seven months pregnant.

They were told that their unborn baby was being put on the at-risk register, but when their daughter was born in February 2000 she was taken away and put into foster care.

"At a hearing in June we had a lot of medical experts giving evidence.

"Many of them said that the cause of death was not suspicious but two people maintained it was child abuse.

"They included Professor Meadow, who said the cause of death was consistent with smothering," Karen said.

The couple have had no contact with their daughter for 18 months and do not know where she lives.

"How can they possibly remove a child and have it formally adopted without an inquest ever being held and a cause of death known?"

She added: "We have had a double loss.

"My daughter was wrongfully removed and denied a life with her proper parents.

"Even if we did get her back, which we never will, our lives have been ruined by the evidence of so-called experts."

Last week the Attorney General, Lord Goldsmith, announced he was appointing a top-level group to consider whether an in-depth review was needed of cases involving Dr Alan Williams, a pathologist whose evidence was criticised in Mrs Clark's case.

The Crown Prosecution Service is also considering whether to order a review of cases involving Sir Roy or Dr Williams.

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## The Man at centre of controversy

- ?? Professor Sir Roy Meadow
- ?? Age: 70
- ?? Lives: North Yorkshire
- ?? 1960-70: Qualified at Oxford University and worked at leading paediatric centres in the country, including Great Ormond Street and Guy's Hospital, London, and the Institute of Child Health, Birmingham.
- ?? 1970-80: Senior lecturer at Leeds University and consultant paediatrician in the city.
- ?? 1980-98: Professor and head of the department of paediatrics and child health at St James's Hospital, Leeds.
- ?? Former president of the British Paediatric Association and of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health.
- ?? Specialist in the care and protection of children and is regarded as a world authority on child abuse.
- ?? 1977: Coined the term Munchausen's syndrome by proxy to describe a particular form of child abuse in most cases caused by mothers inventing symptoms and fabricating signs in their children as a way of gaining attention for themselves.
- ?? 1989: Caused outrage when he suggested that up to 10 per cent of 500 babies annually labelled as cot deaths in the UK had in fact been killed by their parents mainly by smothering.
- ?? 1997: Knight Bachelor, New Year's Honours List.
- ?? 1999: Gave evidence in trial of solicitor Sally Clark, claiming that the odds of her losing two of her babies to sudden infant death syndrome were "one in 73 million". His assessment was subsequently discredited.
- ?? 2003: Chief prosecution witness in trial of Trupti Patel, cleared last month of smothering her three babies. His view that "one sudden infant death is a tragedy, two is suspicious and three is murder" has become known as Meadow's Law.
- ?? Future: He could face a General Medical Council inquiry. Up to six cases in which he was involved when mothers were convicted of murder could also be reviewed.

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