

The Truth Hurts: Why the Government has refused No 2 Abuse its Enquiry (09/04/09)

In the wake of startling new discoveries made by Teresa Cooper and in what can only be described as an appalling act of political cowardice, the government has issued a statement confirming that it will resist an enquiry into the illegal drugging of girls at Kendall House and possibly at least six other major care homes around the country.

A spokeswoman for the Department for Children, Schools and Families has stated that she could not “see the merits” of raising an enquiry in relation to the treatment these girls received during a period which spanned over twenty years. The merits, according to the DCSF have been diminished by the sands of time and by past attempts at addressing similar issues, most notably in Sir William Utting’s 1996 report ‘People Like Us’ and Sir Ronald Waterhouse’s report ‘Lost in care’.

What the DCFS don’t elaborate upon however is the systematic failure of these reports to motivate the government into responding appropriately to the findings and fears over the lack of action post these reports have been voiced as recently as 2005. There are still grave concerns over how children in care are being treated and with mounting pressure from opposition parties and pressure groups like No 2 Abuse, the present government will need to do more than try to faze the public with its tired rhetoric and its superficial spin.

In an article entitled “Updating People Like Us”, the message being put forward is clear: these reports are being revisited today precisely because the government is not responding to the tangible evidence it has before it, which shows an unequivocal need to allow enquiries of this nature to take place so that the problems that have been blighting the care system for over thirty years can finally be tackled. The review itself, which was carried out by consultants Marian Stuart and Catherine Baines, finds that although legislative and policy driven safeguards have been put in place, there is still a sweeping gap between policy and practice. It is that gap that enquiries like the one asked for by Teresa Cooper can and will help reduce.

Yet, perhaps the most worrying sentiment in the latest review of Sir Utting’s report is the acknowledgement that child care professionals still do not have the required knowledge to understand and promote the efficient safeguarding of children. Sir Waterhouse’s report into the scandal behind the locked doors of care homes in North Wales, whilst being much needed exposure, also remained very insular in its outlook and did not strive to reach out to other care homes in the UK where children were being exposed to violence and sexual assault all within a secretive regime that saw many take their lives and even go on to commit murder as a result of their experiences.

Astonishingly, this report was also revisited in 2000, by the Nordic Committee for Human Rights to illustrate, once again, the difficulties of narrow focus on complex and long-running child abuse issues. This piecemeal approach to a nationwide problem has left with it a legacy of ghosts, which haunt successive governments at sporadic intervals but which will never rest until the issues stemming from these institutions are at once revealed and resolved. There has never been a better time to do this, than now.

With evidence gathered over a period of sixteen years, and from her own personal experience at Kendall House, Teresa Cooper has taken her story to BBC, who in turn showed Teresa’s care home files to Jeffrey Aronson, professor of clinical pharmacology at Oxford University and President of the

British Pharmacological Society. Jeffrey Aronson in his interview with the BBC stated that he had never before seen such large doses of medication being administered to girls and that it was possible that these doses and combinations of drugs were responsible for the subsequent birth defects which arose in the children of the women who were subjected to such treatment at Kendall House. What makes Kendall House so unique in terms of its context when considering the thousands of children who have experienced poor treatment in care homes around the country, is precisely this: Kendall House used vulnerable girls to test the government's latest drugs and now it is not just these girls that are paying the price but post adulthood, their children too.

Findings of this nature are rare and whilst the government may be embarrassed to respond to what can only be described as abuse of the worst kind by a state power, the reality is that the Kendall House ladies do not want revenge; they want a chance to prevent children in care from experiencing the same inhuman and degrading treatment they did. An enquiry into why the government is continuously unable to redress the widening gap between law and life will make that difference and unwittingly, could also usher in exciting and hopeful new developments into the reversal of harmful genetic changes caused by drug abuse in the future.

To date, there is also another national outcry waiting in the wings which for the most part has remained largely unreported and relates to children being placed in adult psychiatric units, where they are being exposed to sexual harassment and possibly the administering of inappropriate drugs for sedative purposes. In an article by Times on October 1st, 2008, yet another report was published, which criticised the government for allowing children to be admitted into adult psychiatric wards despite an explicit promise to stop the practice. Unsurprisingly, finances were a key issue in the government's reasons for not being able to stop such admissions. The report goes on to cite several other areas of concern, amongst them the lack of awareness young people have in relation to their advocacy rights (which are not being made clear to 80 % of children in these wards) and fewer than one in four trusts allocates young people a key worker with any training in children's mental health. This last statistic alone should be an alarming wake up call for the government.

With all of these concerns so inextricably linked and so much a part of the day to day malfunctions of our current system, one can only balk at the lackadaisical response our Labour government has given to No 2 Abuse's request for an enquiry into the events that took place at Kendall House. The scars of being treated as guinea pigs will never leave these ladies and many have already taken their lives, unable to cope with the pain of living with a past that they should never have had to carry.

Many of the girls at Kendall House have gone on to try and remake their lives; some have had children. All of those in the latter category who were contacted and who had suffered massive drug doses, all gave birth to children with neural and physical conditions. Those that were not subjected to the drug treatments and who also gave birth found that their children were born without such problems. A poignant parallel that could not be missed.

An enquiry into Kendall House would offer the government a golden opportunity to finally focus on the child care system in Britain. It would open up the possibility of further research into the frontiers of medicine and the effects of drugs on DNA, which could see the UK leading the world on groundbreaking treatments allowing for defects to be altered before birth or even after. But most of all, it would restore our faith in politics, at a time when we have been let down not just by our banks but by our own beliefs in a democratic system that seems to erode with every injustice.