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January 25, 2004

Hodge 'ignored' warning on family-wrecking scandal

JON UNGOED-THOMAS

MARGARET HODGE, the children's minister, and Harriet Harman, the solicitor general, were warned more than three years ago about a growing scandal in the family courts of children being wrongfully removed from their families.

Jan Loxley, a former government adviser on childcare, wrote to both Hodge and Harman. She told them that families were being destroyed because of false accusations of child abuse based on theories expounded by Professor Sir Roy Meadow.

Last week Hodge announced reviews of an estimated 5,000 cases in family courts where children have been taken from parents. Another 258 criminal cases involving Meadow's theories will be re-examined. Meadow, a distinguished paediatrician who retired in 1997, now faces a General Medical Council investigation into allegations of misconduct.

Loxley is angry that action was not taken sooner. In her letters dated May 17, 2000, she wrote that many mothers were being falsely accused of Munchausen's syndrome by proxy, a diagnosis created by Meadow based on the theory that carers may deliberately harm children to attract attention.

She wrote: "I do hope that you will take this issue seriously, the statistics are frightening concerning the numbers of families wrongly accused and the harm done to them."

Hodge has previously been accused of failing to heed warnings of childcare scandals. As the leader of Islington council in north London, she dismissed an investigation into the borough's childcare homes as "gutter journalism" — although many of the abuse allegations were subsequently proved.

Loxley's letter highlighted a psychologist's report which denounced "horrifyingly inappropriate" instances of misdiagnosis of Munchausen's by proxy. The psychologist, Lisa Blakemore-Brown, said the syndrome had no "robust scientific and statistical

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base”.

Loxley herself had been accused of deliberately harming her young son, despite no evidence of abuse. Her son and daughter were put on the at-risk register, but were removed after local politicians and supporters campaigned for her.

She said this weekend: “I find it incredible that Hodge and Harman are suddenly announcing action as if they were previously unaware of the scale of the problem. The government knew for years and was either wilfully negligent or completely inept.”

Harman said last week that she had known Loxley for many years but could not specifically recall the letter. “Concern has been growing over this issue over the years and Jan is one of many who has been saying this,” she said.

“A court judgment has now set out the kind of approach other judges should take when dealing with medical experts. We are acting as quickly as possible.”

A spokesman for Hodge at the Department for Education and Skills said it had not traced the letter.



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