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The child abuse myths unravel

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After Munchausen's syndrome by proxy, another medical theory looks set to crumble. Cases of shaken baby syndrome (SBS) examined in a review of infant deaths ordered by the attorney-general. Like the hundreds of parents accused of causing or faking illness in their children as a form of child abuse, those involved in SBS cases argue they have been damned by a medical diagnosis that does not hold water.

Sally Clark is the Manchester solicitor whose wrongful conviction for the murder of her two babies began the unravelling of Munchausen's, the abuse theory formulated by Professor Sir Roy Meadow. She was originally accused of having shaken one of her babies to death. Several other mothers are in prison, convicted of murder or manslaughter on the basis of supposedly "classic" signs: bleeding in the baby's brain or eyes and fractures to the rib or leg bones. More have suffered the intrusion of social service investigations or have had their children taken away. "I have had lots of hopeful calls from families," said Rioch Edwards-Brown, who founded the Five Percenters, a campaign group, after she was wrongly accused — then cleared — of shaking her son Riordan. "We now know that injuries producing these symptoms can be caused by trauma at birth or falls. Which is not to say babies are never shaken, but there is no such thing as a 'syndrome'."

This week the first anti- Munchausen's conference will take place in Australia. One of the speakers will be Charles Pragnell who was among the first to raise the alarm about the diagnosis in Britain. Now living in Australia, Pragnell has witnessed the damage that can be wrought when zealotry overtakes common sense. He was working for Cleveland social services when scores of children were taken into care on the say-so of Marietta Higgs, a paediatrician working on a now discredited theory about sexual abuse.

"One of the things we were supposed to learn from Cleveland was that social workers should not act on the basis of a medical diagnosis alone," Pragnell said. "If you look at Munchausen's cases there is often no corroborative evidence. "

The child protection service has a history of accepting theory as fact: satanic abuse, anal dilation, repressed memory syndrome and now Munchausen's and SBS. "If a paediatrician suspects child abuse there is no need to give it a label," said Pragnell. "It's for the police and social services to investigate. By pinning the blame on someone the doctor is acting as judge and jury."

Yet one has to wonder whether the furore over Munchausen's risks

A vertical advertisement for Microsoft Windows Mobile. At the top is the Microsoft logo. Below it is a photograph of a man in a suit and glasses, looking to the side. Underneath the photo, the text reads: "YOUR DOCUMENTS, NOW AVAILABLE BETWEEN FLOORS". Below this text is a silver mobile phone. At the bottom of the ad, it says "See for yourself" with a green arrow icon, and the Windows Mobile logo is at the very bottom.

the pendulum swinging too far the other way. Margaret Hodge, the children's minister, said up to 5,000 cases that had been through the family courts might need to be looked at again and added fuel to the fire by saying parents whose children had been adopted would not get them back. But a relatively small number of cases are likely to hinge on medical evidence alone.

Paediatricians are becoming reluctant to get involved in child protection, fearing complaints or worse. Several have had their car tyres slashed and their homes daubed with slogans.

Despite the criticism Professor Alan Craft, president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, said he retained "complete confidence" in the diagnosis of Munchausen's and believes the row can have only harmful consequences for children: "There is no doubt that some parents do abuse children. We are getting to a stage where (cases of) children being harmed will not be picked up."