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January 25, 2004

### His legacy of shattered lives

**Thousands of families were destroyed by Roy Meadow's work, Margarette Driscoll, the only journalist to have interviewed him in a decade, explains what went wrong**

It was an idyllic English summer's day. Professor Sir Roy Meadow, grey-haired, genial and quietly spoken, led the way round the back of his Georgian house in Yorkshire and up the stairway to his office, an eyrie perched above a disused summer house. Marianne, his second wife, waved from the garden.

Surrounded by papers, Meadow attempted to explain the expert testimony that he had given at the trial of Sally Clark. She had been accused of killing her two babies; her family believed she was convicted largely on the basis of an erroneous assertion by Meadow that there was a one in 73m chance of two cot deaths in her family.

That was 2½ years ago and Meadow was giving me what would be his only interview in a decade. Then, he was controversial. Now, he is reviled. The former president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health is under siege, a virtual prisoner in that same office, which now overlooks a bleak landscape of leafless trees.

Marianne Meadow says the past few months have been "a nightmare". But tell that to the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of parents who feel they have suffered at Meadow's hands. A father whose four-year-old daughter was taken into care said: "There's no way of even measuring the damage he's done."

A year ago, Clark's conviction was overturned in a blaze of publicity. Shortly afterwards the trial of Trupti Patel, a pharmacist similarly accused — and against whom Meadow also gave evidence — ended in acquittal. Last month Angela Cannings, who lost three babies and was convicted of murdering two of them, was freed by the Court of Appeal.

All these cases, and many more, have a common link: expert testimony from Meadow or one of his acolytes which cast suspicion on the mother. Family campaigners insist that a group of determined paediatricians — followers of Meadow's theories on

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Munchausen's syndrome by proxy, in which a mother injures or fakes illness in her children to gain attention for herself — has been engaged in a witch-hunt, seeing child abuse where none exists.

If true, the consequences have been unspeakable. The Court of Appeal has ordered a review of more than 250 cases where parents may have been wrongly jailed for injuring or killing their children.

But in the criminal courts there must at least be further evidence, or a belief that the case has been proved beyond a reasonable doubt. The bigger scandal lies in the family courts, where thousands of children have been removed from families on expert testimony and where it is necessary only to show that parents have harmed or are likely to harm their children "on the balance of probability".

Margaret Hodge, minister for children, says 5,000 cases heard in the family courts over the past 15 years will be looked at again — but parents of children who were forcibly adopted may never get them back. It is potentially the largest series of miscarriages of justice in history.

It is as though a house of cards built on Meadow's theories about Munchausen's by proxy has come tumbling down and he is buried in the rubble. A glittering career is coming to an ignominious end; in recent days Meadow, 70, has avoided photographers by climbing over his back fence and crossing two fields to catch the bus.

He has been accused of serious professional misconduct, is to appear before the General Medical Council in the autumn and has been advised by lawyers to keep silent. Last week his wife was full of indignation. "Roy has done absolutely nothing wrong," she said.

Meadow's belief in Munchausen's by proxy began during his early career when he was a paediatric kidney specialist in Leeds. Two children raised his suspicions. The first was a six-year-old girl whose urine samples were tainted with blood when they were taken by her mother, but normal when taken by a nurse. The second was a young boy with a baffling amount of salt in his blood (Meadow says that his mother, a former nurse, later admitted to force-feeding him salt through a nasal tube).

When he wrote up his findings he was showered with other cases from suspicious doctors. Munchausen's syndrome, when a patient fakes symptoms to get a doctor's attention, was already recognised. Meadow added "by proxy" for those who faked illnesses in their children.

People were fascinated by the lengths to which parents would go to grab the medical limelight. Paperclips and matchsticks were pushed into ears to simulate perforated eardrums. A child went without

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proper food for two years before doctors twigged that his mother's claim that he could not tolerate solid food was false.

Meadow became a favourite on the lecture circuit and an expert witness in the burgeoning field of child abuse. His research also led him to cot deaths and he became convinced that this was a term sometimes used to cover "awkward truths".

He adopted an American aphorism: "One sudden infant death is a tragedy, two is suspicious and three is murder unless proved otherwise." It was this belief, and perhaps an over-confidence born of years of being revered, that he took into the Clark trial. The incorrect 73m-to-one figure that he carelessly used was from an unpublished government report.

When his cot death research was later challenged it turned out that his research database had been shredded after his retirement from St James's university hospital, Leeds. Campaigners say that his research on Munchausen's by proxy is just as shakily based and is largely opinion, not fact.

Penny Mellor runs Dare to Care, a support network for parents who say they were wrongly accused. "I've got a letter here from a child to a mother starting, 'Hello, my name is Lucy and I am nine years old now', as if her mother would have forgotten her name. It breaks your heart," she says.

"I look at a letter like that and think: what reason for celebration can there be in all this pain?"

Jan Loxley, 53, of Finchley, north London, nearly lost her two children because of Meadow's theory of Munchausen's by proxy and launched a campaign against it. David, her son, suffers from Asperger's syndrome, a form of autism, but when he was a young child it had not been diagnosed. His teachers suspected that he might be a victim of abuse because he avoided eye contact.

When he became ill with chronic fatigue syndrome, social services were called in. Loxley was accused of administering drugs to her son to make him ill. "The drugs had been prescribed by his doctor, but this evidence was ruled inadmissible because the school had not authorised my son to have the time off for those medical visits," she says.

"It was unbelievable. David and his sister were both put on the at-risk register. They said if I didn't co-operate with the investigation they would take them into care." Having once worked in Whitehall, Loxley, a child development expert, was politically well connected. Her MP raised her case with social services and her children were removed from the at-risk register in March 2000.

Two months later Loxley wrote to several MPs

including Hodge and Harriet Harman, now the solicitor-general, citing research that documented the doubts over Meadow's theory. "I do hope that you will take this issue seriously," she wrote. "The statistics are frightening concerning the numbers of families wrongly accused and the harm done to them." Loxley now accuses the government of "ineptitude and incompetence".

If action had been taken, William and Michelle Carter might now have their children. All four were removed after Meadow concluded that Michelle was suffering from Munchausen's by proxy and had tried to poison their youngest daughter in January 1998. The child suffered fits, but recovered. Six months later the couple were told that a urine test showed traces of imipramine, an antidepressant used against bed-wetting, taken by their older daughter.

"All we can think is that a tablet accidentally fell on the floor and the little one picked it up and put it in her mouth," says Carter. "It was a straightforward accident and accepted as so by the police. But the next thing we knew, social services had us in court. And we made the fatal error of agreeing that both sides would abide by the word of one expert: Roy Meadow. When he said my wife had poisoned her I could feel the ground giving way beneath my feet."

The Carters' two older children, who are in their teens, are in care and their parents are allowed to see them once a month. The two youngest, aged nine and seven, were adopted, against the Carters' wishes, three years ago. "As far as I am concerned the adoption is illegal," says Carter. "Natural justice says they are still our children and they should come home."

One of the worst aspects of this scandal is that children are less well protected now than they have been for years. The publicity surrounding Meadow has discouraged other doctors from giving expert opinion. Each region is supposed to have a paediatric co-ordinator for cases of child abuse, but 60 of the 180 posts are vacant.

"It really is a very worrying situation," says Professor Alan Craft, president of the paediatrics college. "Doctors have had their car tyres slashed, graffiti daubed on their houses and their children abused. No wonder people don't want to put their heads above the parapet. The truth is that parents do abuse their children and the way Roy has been pilloried is most unfair."

Craft has been a friend of Meadow for many years. He says that the professor has taken his fall hard: "He's a very unhappy, sad person."

Meadow's enemies will say this is no more than he deserves. But when a gaunt and frail Clark was released from prison, she said that in a case like hers there were "no winners". How right she was.



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