

Couple told to forget they had four children

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Nicole Martin reports on the parents who say a mistake robbed them of their family.

It was on Feb 11 1999 that the lives of William and Michelle Carter were irrevocably changed. After considering evidence from Prof Sir Roy Meadow, a judge ruled that their son and three daughters should be put into care.

Walking out of the High Court, the couple were told to "go home and forget that you ever had any children". Devastated, Mrs Carter tried that night to commit suicide.

She survived but four years later she and her husband are still fighting to get their children back. Their elder two, aged 17 and 14, are in foster care, and the younger, aged eight and six, whom they have not seen for more than three years, have been adopted.

The couple's ordeal started in January 1998 when their youngest daughter, then only 16 months old, fell seriously ill. She was taken to hospital where she suffered multiple heart attacks and a stroke.

She made a full recovery, but six months later the Carters, whose names have been changed to protect their children's identities, were contacted by Wandsworth social services in south-west London.

They said that a urine sample taken from their daughter had shown traces of a drug called Imipramine, which had not been administered by doctors treating her in hospital.

The police dismissed the case after the couple said the tablets had been prescribed to their eldest daughter to stop her wetting her bed, and that one of them must have fallen on the floor and been accidentally swallowed by her.

At that point the Carters believed a line had been drawn under the matter, hardly surprising for a couple whose only previous dealing with social services was when Mrs Carter, 38, needed help for post-natal depression.

But social services continued their investigations, and after numerous child protection conferences the case went to the family division at the High Court.

There Sir Roy concluded that Mrs Carter had deliberately tried to poison their child, arguing that she suffered from Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy.

On his evidence alone, the judge ordered that the couple's children be put into a care. The next day they were taken away.

Since then they have lost almost all contact with their children.

They are not allowed to see their two younger daughters, and are permitted to spend only three hours every three months with their elder children.

"The day we lost them was by far the hardest days of our lives," said Mr Carter, 31, who gave up his job as a manager of a diner in 1997 to care for his wife who suffers with osteoarthritis.

"We last saw the older ones in May, but know absolutely nothing about the younger ones, what they do, where they live or what they are thinking.

"It's worse than if they were dead. Then, at least, we would have some finality.

"Knowing that they are there and not being able to see them is the worst punishment any parent could be given."

The couple, who joined protesters yesterday, are hoping to have their case reviewed after the Sally Clark and Trupti Patel cases in which Sir Roy gave evidence.

"We will not give up," said Mr Carter. "We are determined to get our children back and end this nightmare."