

Case Study

In one BFMS member case, which we will refer to as Case A, whose only child has been lost to them for many years following counselling from an unregulated school counsellor, their efforts to make third party complaints to the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy, (BACP), about the counsellor, and the BACP's own complaints process, have all failed. Parents expressed their desperation that their once loving child, with such promise, brought up in a comfortable happy home with no financial worries, could have her mind warped almost overnight. In the House of Lords debate on 2nd March 2020: *Mental Health: Unregulated Treatment*, Baroness Jolly, who raised the debate, referred to the potential for harm and said, 'It is vital that the Government assess the impact of these harms. I have been contacted by individuals whose stories, although anecdotal, paint a picture of a real risk to their mental health and safety. The stories are extremely distressing. They tell the tale of vulnerable people putting their trust in therapists only to be exploited and isolated from their loved ones. It is no exaggeration to say that lives have been ruined.'

Patients say that reporting harms through voluntary regulatory bodies can be an arduous process. This has been demonstrated in cases such as that of Patrick Strudwick. His therapist subjected him to so-called conversion therapy. Mr Strudwick had to wait two years for the BACP to withdraw her membership.'

The child, now an adult, in Case A, experienced bullying in primary school, had been referred to a clinical psychologist and there was a suspicion that she may be on the autistic spectrum.

Unsettled by moving to a secondary boarding school, away from her loving family, and before a follow up assessment and diagnosis, she repeated an abuse claim made by another teenager at school, to a school counsellor. With no suitable qualifications, training or adequate supervision, the counsellor validated the claim through affirmation in therapy. She referred to a senior staff member who in turn involved the police. There was no attempt to look at the child's medical history or to speak to her parents. The police immediately saw inconsistencies in the 'disclosures' in Case A child's story and finding the child not at all credible, they did not take the case any further. However, the unregulated counsellor was not challenged by the fact that the police found no case to answer, and many other therapists openly state the same. Their main concern is what the child '*believes*'. The truth is turned on its head. She continued to support the child in

her false beliefs which escalated through the principle of reinforcement. Her mother was to find that her daughter had then accessed websites on her computer at home, from which she took chunks of narrative to embellish her 'recovered memories' after the police did not accept her story. She proved to be an excellent storyteller, but the police were even less convinced when she presented them with a more lurid 'memory'.

Supported by the counsellor, the teenager moved to stay with family friends, but with no support for her false beliefs, and with actual challenge from friends who had known her all of her life, she asked social services to provide her with a home with another family over the school holidays. Given her age this was a temporary placement, but during this process she found another ally in the form of a social worker who also validated her false memories. This social worker found a family, provided money, allowed her to stay out late and assisted her with grant applications for university etc.

University beckoned then the workplace, but by then the child was entirely alienated from her parents.

In the House of Lords debate, Lord Marks said, 'We have heard harrowing accounts of victims, often young, brainwashed by unscrupulous and controlling individuals. These charlatans play on their clients' suffering, deluding them into a false belief in their treatment, often conjuring up in them fake memories about their early years and inducing unhealthy long-term dependence on the therapist and rejection of families and friends.'

Case A parents informed the BACP in their initial complaint that they were concerned about the qualifications of the counsellor and her methods; concerned that there was no monitoring of counsellors in schools and concerned that her supervision was limited and from someone who also appeared to not be qualified. None of this appeared to bother the BACP. They remained stuck within their cognitive dissonance/confirmation bias in support of their counsellor. Nothing the parents said, showed them or did would shake that bias. In a further letter, parents wrote, 'The BACP's Professional Conduct Procedure provides no fair or effective recourse for complainants.'

Eventually, in an eight page letter, the BACP lecture these parents stating, 'If you intend to bring this complaint as a third party under Paragraph 1.2 d you will need to demonstrate that you meet the criteria set out in the guidelines for third party complaints. You will need to be able to demonstrate that that you have a sufficient interest in the matter, that you have been directly affected and that you have

the written permission from the client, your daughter, to make the complaint.’ Paragraph 1.2d remained unchanged and was the same as it was when Anne Rogers examined the issue in 2013. As Case A’s daughter was deluded, brainwashed and isolated from her family, she remained confirmed in her delusions that only emerged once she saw the counsellor, and would obviously never agree to a complaint against that counsellor. Indeed, she became extremely angry with her heartbroken, innocent parents.

So, inevitably, then came the sting in the tail, the brick wall, after months of delays. The Panel concluded that it wasn’t ‘satisfied that the complainants met the criteria for third party complaints in that the client had not been made aware that the complaint was being submitted, and they did not have the necessary authority and consent to submit the information.’ They ‘rejected the complaint’.

Case A’s parents sent a 66-page report to the PSA which accredits the BACP and another 25 organisations ‘of people working in occupations not regulated by law’. (See: www.professionalstandards.org.uk concerning its Accreditation scheme) This covers 55 different occupations.

The BACP successfully strung out the complaints process over years to the point where the child had become an adult, so the parents then felt they had no hope of holding the therapist to account through the BACP 3rd Party complaints process. The Case A family have written hundreds of letters to various bodies, including their Council; MPs; the school; the university; the PSA; the Department of Health; Health and Home Affairs Select Committees; the BACP; the Children’s Commissioner etc. Despite her entire extended family knowing that what the child is saying is untrue, other distant groups validate their daughter’s false beliefs to support their own agendas and narratives, and reward her through social media ‘likes’ and opportunities which then deprive those who truly have been abused in childhood. The validation reinforces and leads to further embellishment of the web of false beliefs.

Case A’s parents were regularly ‘blocked’ and cut off by comments such as ‘we will not be commenting further on this matter’. In one response, these desperately worried, frustrated and exhausted parents wrote, ‘You do not have a licence to promulgate misinformation, untruths and false memories...by reinforcing her elaborate false memories you are helping to sustain her delusions and mental ill health.’

If Case A thought they couldn't fall any further into Alice's rabbit hole, they were wrong. In extraordinary letters to this family, seemingly highly respected organisations appear to have fallen into a dystopian world in which reality doesn't matter and is turned on its head.

The Carl Beech trial was ongoing in Newcastle Crown Court at the time, and parents reminded these organisations that he was proven to be a serial fantasist who had 121 sessions of counselling from an unregulated counsellor, Vicky Patterson, over 4 years, who never questioned or challenged him. She accepted what he said, no matter how lurid his claims were, affirmed those beliefs in a non-judgmental way and taught him how to remain calm when his delusions/fantasies caused him anxiety. From the court case cross examination, it is not possible to know if she assisted in the embellishments of Carl Beech, through her breathing methods in therapy, as 'her memory' was frequently 'vague' even when talking about multiple child murders, but her tacit acceptance of Carl Beech's fantasies undoubtedly validated them to him and others as is happening in Case A.

Case A's parents also pointed out that the esteemed former Court of Appeal judge, Sir Richard Henriques, who was asked to review the police management of Carl Beech's claims, in 'Operation Midland', in February 2016, criticised authorities for many things, including failing to check the qualifications of counsellors. It is of note that in his recent book, *From Crime to Crime*, Sir Richard also refers to Dr Elly Hanson, a therapist, apparently brought in to check whether she believed that the counsellor, Ms Patterson, was competent to determine the veracity of the claims made by Beech. Dr Hanson considered that she was, and that Carl Beech's claims were credible. Sir Richard wrote that Dr Elly Hanson's opinion was 'valueless' as she had not been given all the interviews which showed that Beech said different things to different people, and furthermore she said she hadn't had time to read what she was given. Furthermore, in cross examination of Vicky Patterson during the trial, it seems Dr Hanson only met Ms Patterson twice, the first meeting was a therapeutic session to help Ms Patterson and the second was when Carl Beech and Elly Hanson joined forces in a touring exhibition starting in January 2016 in Bristol, about survivors of child abuse. Confirmation bias and the way therapy was practised, ensured that no checks and balances were put in place. As journalist Rod Liddle wrote, 'the reality doesn't matter at all: it's all about how people feel.'

In another recent revelation, a colleague of Dr Elly Hanson, Valerie Sinason, headed a group of 38 counsellors, psychotherapists and psychologists in a letter to the Guardian in defence of Carl Beech after he was sentenced to 18 years in 2019. In the letter, the public was

told that ‘fantasists and liars’ as Carl Beech has been described, needed to be understood, because if they have Dissociative Identity Disorder (D.I.D. once called Multiple Personality Disorder, (MPD) one identity may not recall what another identity has done or said. The obvious point is that the core issue should be whether what is said is the truth, whichever identity was speaking at the time. It seems that for a particular group of therapists that is not how they see the world.

If therapists turn the truth upside down or maintain that the most important issue is what their patient/client ‘believes’ which is ‘their truth’, even if it emerged in therapy; even if it cannot be corroborated and even if it can be proven to be an absolute fantasy, then it will be impossible to convince these therapists that their version of ‘truth’ is wrong. So, is there any point in complaining to these unregulated bodies in ‘false memory-type cases’ if their thinking is so warped?

Parents in Case A, giving up on the BACP, have had to inform organisations that they could be breaching Human Rights and Data protection laws. Despite clear evidence to disprove claims made by their daughter, organisations refer to her ‘perspective and views’ being more important than the parents’ perspective and views. In one of hundreds of letters hitting brick walls, they plaintively write, ‘As our daughter has made up her history (after unregulated school counselling) real abused children moved from one foster placement to another, would have every right to feel deeply betrayed by both our child and organisations which validate and sustain those lies’.

In the Lords debate, Lord Garnier said: ‘At its heart, this debate is about preventing the exploitation of the vulnerable - not of the mentally ill, the elderly or children, who are protected quite widely by the law already, but of those whose vulnerability, be it emotional or psychological, permits them to be preyed on by charlatan counsellors. These charlatans suborn them through their cynical promises of peace of mind and future happiness; through lies about their families and bogus therapy they suborn them into breaking off contact with them.’

Baroness Jolly said, ‘It is essential that these harms are documented so that we can find solutions. One possible solution, which I favour, is statutory regulation. This has been debated before in this House, largely driven by my noble friend Lord Alderdice. Unfortunately, the issue has been pushed off the agenda in recent years, but now is the time to revisit it. The Government have previously stated that statutory regulation may be introduced if harms to the public can be demonstrated and this risk cannot be addressed through other means. Will the Minister give some indication of what the department might do to help with the issue of assessment of harms?’

There was palpable shock on the red benches when Lord Bethel said the government 'had no plans' to regulate, dismissing the unanimous voices calling for regulation of psychotherapists and counsellors. He informed the members that millions were being spent on the IAPT programme across the country, as if that would solve the problem. They had hit yet another brick wall.

Conclusion

The Government needs to recognise that some therapists do fail their clients very badly, and through cognitive bias they will never accept it and will remain certain that they are right. Has the Government fallen foul of the same confirmation bias? Until psychotherapists and counsellors are regulated, despite all the money and the sensible early thinking behind the IAPT programme, these abuses will continue. *Regulation must co-exist with IAPT.* The latter curriculum which addresses the need for therapists to understand various forms of mental ill health, check histories etc is very welcome and if such checks were done in Case A, and the Carl Beech case, things may not have proceeded as they did. In Case A, the therapist was not interested in the child's mental health history, and undoubtedly not trained to understand it; had no interest in what parents had to say; nor did she want to read any of the books and articles they showed her on the dangers of false memory. Despite the police dropping the case completely, she continued. She was unable to see a delusion developing, and if she had, she would not have known what to do about it.

Blind acceptance and naïve affirmation can lead to absolute disasters and until training is put in place about the risks inherent in counselling and psychotherapy, alongside the regulation of psychotherapists and counsellors, we can expect to see many more cases than these two and those described in the House of Lords debate with the government aiming for counsellors in every school. Further, if disasters do occur and families try to complain to membership organisations, at the nub of the problem with third party complaints, is that as the individual who has had their mind warped needs to give permission, the complaints will all fall, details never even considered. The delusions will become embedded, and these membership bodies will fail the client, their whole family and the public.

By informing the person in therapy about the complaint, instead of investigating, learning, changing and providing robust supervision and training, not only will the deluded client not agree: if there was any glimmer of hope of a reconciliation between client and family members, this action will surely snuff that out completely.