

# Working with the Media

Why it says what it does about social work and why it's important to fight back.

# Martin Ruddock's Story

- Martin was Kimberley Carlile's social worker, Greenwich social services. Kimberley, aged 4, was killed by her stepfather on 8 June 1986
- "It was Murder" – "He let her die"  
Headline and caption in the *Daily Star*
- Personal crisis and public outrage

# In his own words...

“The vitriol and anger in the *Star* and other papers was some of the nastiest reporting imaginable and it hurt to read it. What in part hurt most was that it fed my own self-punishing feelings and made me begin to accept I was the guilty party deserving of punishment. Fortunately, friends supported me to evaluate realistically my part and reject the role of becoming another victim.”

*Martin Ruddock, “A receptacle for public anger”, in Social Work, the Media and Public Relations, B Franklin and N Parton (eds), Routledge, 1991*

# What happened to the workers?

- Maria Colwell (1974) – Diana Lees sacked
- Jasmine Beckford (1985) – Gunn Wahlstrom and Diane Dietmann sacked
- Victoria Climbié (2003) – Lisa Arthurworrey, Carole Baptiste and Angella Mairs sacked
- Baby Peter (2009) – social worker Maria Ward and team manager Gillie Christou sacked

# What happened to the top managers?

- Maria Colwell (1974) – East Sussex social services director Dennis Allen tells inquiry: “The buck stops with me”. He is unscathed.
- Jasmine Beckford (1985) – Brent director Val Howarth told: “Not your fault”. Becomes director of Childline and a “People’s peer”
- Victoria Climbié (2003) – Haringey director Mary Richardson takes over Hackney, chief executive Gurbux Singh takes over CRE

# Then something else happened...

- Lord Laming, in his inquiry report (2003) into Victoria's death, describes the “breathtaking” failure of senior managers to take responsibility for their organisation's feeble response
- Baby Peter (2009) – Haringey director Sharon Shoemith, deputy director Cecilia Hitchen, head of service Clive Preece all sacked.

# So that's alright then!?

- Press, politicians and inquiry reports have begun directing their fire at senior managers as well as frontline social workers. But the media (and politicians) still get it wrong.
- *“People have a right to know from you what there is to know, but it gets frustrating when that becomes distorted or mischief is made with it. We have to help people understand how complicated the work is...”*

Julie Jones, former director, Westminster

# What's the problem?

- Drama – social work as devil in a medieval morality play
- Public conscience and appetite for horror satisfied at same time
- Public cops and social work robbers – that's the story, but social work is more complex
- Politics – what happened to collectivism?
- Social work has lost its voice

# Social work's two media masks

- “Wimps” – social workers who fail to intervene – “A bungling social worker was blamed yesterday for the death of four-year-old Kimberley Carlile” (*Mirror*, 12/12/87)
- “Bullies” - agents of an unduly interventionist state, as in the 1987 Cleveland affair, when 121 cases of child sexual abuse were “diagnosed” by Dr Marietta Higgs supported by social worker Sue Richardson.

# What is to be done?

- Make your voice heard!
- *“I was instructed by the members not to speak to the media at all [about Jasmine Beckford] and this became a major problem, both from the point of view of helping the general public understand the wider social work issues and in simply answering allegations made against me personally. In effect the press were just ignored.”*

Val Howarth, director, Brent

# Martin Ruddock again

- Issued press statement saying he would take part in the official inquiry – “I noticed an improvement in the attitude of the press”
- Wrote article for social work press just before inquiry report was published
- Contributed to Channel 4 Dispatches programme, which was “sympathetic”
- Thanks to lobbying, Guardian published supportive article

# Lessons learned

- “Press crucified me but also gave me the means to communicate the reason why I believed the crisis had occurred”
- “I believe that society and the media needed me to make an honest acceptance of my responsibility before they were able to address the wider issues within the Kimberley Carlile debate”

# One more lesson...

- “My passivity was making me a powerless victim. I believe this is also true for the profession which continues to find it hard to be *proactive* in shaping the public image of social work. We are too frightened of making mistakes to use the media to our advantage”
- Are things any different more than 20 years later? Well, yes and no!

# Social work and the media

- Martin Ruddock had to resign in order to speak out. He recruited solicitor Brian Raymond, south-east London's Max Clifford
- Local authorities still try to hide, eg Haringey and Sharon Shoemith. It never works!
- Local authorities becoming more risk-averse, eg sharp rise in care proceedings post-Baby Peter.

# Social Work Task Force

- Social work as a profession needs to improve its capacity to:
  - engage with the media constructively and proactively
  - respond to coverage of high profile cases
  - encourage journalists to tell stories about successful social work as well as covering cases where things have gone wrong

*Facing Up to the Task*, interim report, July 09

# Crisis in Nomansland

- 8-year-old Boy A, in the care of Nomansland Council, sets fire to his foster carers' house, burning it to the ground. Luckily the foster carers are out and no one is hurt. A neighbour tells the Nomansland Gazette that the carers often go out, leaving Boy A on his own. What the Gazette doesn't know is that Boy A has a history of arson offences. As it happens, his carers don't know about it either.
- Here are the ingredients of a crisis. What are they?

# Cooking up a Crisis

Here are some ingredients:

- The foster carers have been negligent, regularly leaving Boy A without a babysitter. The council could be blamed for its choice of carers
- The council, supposedly “in loco parentis”, lets the children in its care run amok around its own town
- The council has been negligent, failing to inform the foster carers that Boy A has a record of arson offences
- How should Nomansland Council handle the crisis?

# Handling the Crisis

- Have a crisis management team
- Have a crisis strategy
- Act swiftly – seize the initiative
- Get a clear picture of what has happened
- Agree strategy – identify messages
- Keep talking – never say “no comment”
- Be prepared for the story to run and run
- Learn from the crisis

# Handy Crisis Tips

- Be informative, honest and as human as possible
- Do not speculate or lie
- Avoid being doorstepped – be interviewed in controlled circumstances
- Try not to appear to be reading out statements
- Avoid press conferences – far better to do a series of one-to-one briefings