

Safety of convictions and victims' motivation

By Kathleen A Marshall, the Scotsman 03/04/03

Having chaired the Edinburgh inquiry into abuse perpetrated in children's homes in the 1970s and 1980s, I should like to comment on the BBC Frontline Scotland programme (1 April) concerning the safety of the conviction of a care worker from Quarrier's Homes in the west of Scotland.

I have no personal knowledge of the Quarrier's case and, therefore, cannot form a judgment on it. It would, of course, be a tragedy if someone were wrongly convicted of abuse, and it is right that those questioning the safety of a conviction should raise concerns about it.

But I would caution strongly against drawing general conclusions from this case about the safety of such convictions and the motivation of victims.

I have no doubt at all about the safety of the convictions in the Edinburgh case. Neither do I believe that the victims were motivated by a desire for compensation. Indeed, our inquiry report, based on extensive contact with victims, made a point of stating that fact.

The fact that a particular establishment seems to outsiders to be successful and happy is no guarantee that abuse is not being perpetrated there. Two of the homes involved in the Edinburgh inquiry were also regarded as "happy" places.

Paradoxically, the fact that there was much in those environments that the children appreciated (and did make them happy to some extent) also made it more difficult for them to report the abuse to which they were subjected. This was partly because they felt it was unlikely that they would be believed, and partly because they feared removal from that establishment to some of the "worse" places they either knew about, or had heard about.

Public and media opinion is in danger of lurching from one extreme to the other - from disbelief, to outrage and now back to a comfortable denial. We need to take a mature and realistic approach to such allegations and avoid over-generalisations. To do otherwise would be a great disservice to those many good and decent people who have so painfully related their experiences to us as a service to other children.

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