Practice Reviews

Practice case review 1: Baby P

Peter Connelly (Baby P) was 17 months old when he died on August 3 2007 in Haringey, London. He was found dead in a blood-stained cot with more than 50 injuries, despite being on the ‘child protection / at-risk register’ and receiving 60 visits from social workers, police and health professionals over eight months. In 2008 two men (Steven Barker – stepfather, Barker’s brother Jason Owen) and Peter’s mother Tracey Connelly were convicted of causing or allowing his death.

2006

1 March: Baby P, Peter, is born.

13 October: Peter taken to GP with bruising. Mother said he fell down stairs.

November / December: Unknown to professionals, the mother’s new boyfriend Steven Barker moves in to the home.

11 December: His mother and maternal grandmother are arrested after a GP spots Peter has a head injury and other bruises.

22 December: Peter is placed on the Haringey child protection register for physical abuse and neglect.

2007

26 January: Peter is returned to his mother, though she is still on police bail.

9 April: His mother takes him to North Middlesex hospital. Staff identify bruises and scratches on his face, head and body.

1 June: Social worker Maria Ward informs the police of bruising on Peter’s face during an unannounced visit. Staff at North Middlesex hospital find 12 areas of bruising. Social services arrange for a family friend to supervise the baby’s care.

June 5: Mother arrested for a second time and questioned by the police.

29 June: Jason Owen moves into the home with a 15-year-old runaway girl.

25 July: At a legal planning meeting it is decided that the case did not meet the threshold for care proceedings.

30 July: Ward makes her last visit to see Peter. He has chocolate smears over his face and hands, and anti-bacterial cream on his scalp.

31 July: The Crown Prosecution Service decide there is insufficient evidence to charge the mother.

1 August: Peter is taken to St Anne’s Hospital. Dr Sabah Al-Zayyat notes bruises to his body and face but does not perform a full examination because he is “miserable and cranky”.

2 August: Police tell the mother she will not be prosecuted in relation to Peter’s injuries.

3 August: Following a 999 call, Peter is taken to hospital but pronounced dead on arrival.

2008

August: Dr Al-Zayyat is banned from working unsupervised by the General Medical Council for 18 months.

11 November: Owen and the 32-year-old boyfriend of Peter’s mother are found guilty of causing Peter’s death. The mother had pleaded guilty to the same charge.

1 December: An independent review declares Haringey’s child protection services to be exceptionally “inadequate”. Council Leader George Meehan and Cabinet Member for Children and Young People Liz Santry resign. The Children’s Secretary, Ed Balls, orders the removal of the Director of Children’s Services, Sharon Shoesmith, from her post. She is sacked later that month.
2009

19 February: Dr Jerome Ikwueke, a GP who saw Peter 14 times before his death, is suspended by the General Medical Council.

29 April: Haringey Council dismisses a social worker and three managers for failings in Peter’s case.

1 May: The boyfriend of Peter’s mother is convicted of raping a two-year-old girl in north London.

22 May: The second serious case review into Peter’s death concludes that child protection staff should have been able to stop the abuse “at the first serious incident”. The boyfriend of Peter’s mother is jailed for life. His mother is jailed indefinitely. Owen, the lodger, is given an indeterminate sentence for public protection.

Some key issues and failings noted from reviews of the case and the subsequent Laming Inquiry include:

• Tracey Connelly had three other children - two of which were also placed on the “at risk” protection register by social services - but none was taken away from her until Baby Peter died.

• Social workers failed to realise that Steven Barker was secretly living with the family and abusing Baby Peter for nine months before his death, despite repeated visits from the authorities.

• The authorities also failed to notice when Barker’s brother Jason Owen, moved in with his 15-year-old runaway girlfriend five weeks before Peter died.

• Baby Peter was taken to Whittington Hospital in Archway, north London, with bruises on his head, nose, chest and right shoulder in December 2006. Police arrested and interviewed Connelly on suspicion of assaulting him, something she denied. On December 22 Peter was placed on the child protection register.

• Maria Ward, a social worker with Haringey Council in north London, made a pre-arranged home visit in July 2007. She missed injuries on Peter’s face and hands after he is deliberately smeared with chocolate to hide them. The following day police handed reports to the Crown Prosecution Service, including statements from two doctors saying Peter’s bruising was suggestive of “non-accidental” injury. Prosecutors decided there was not enough evidence to bring a case.

• When Baby Peter underwent a paediatric assessment on August 1 2007 – two days before his death – there were just two consultants working at St Ann’s Hospital in Tottenham, which should have four in post. Due to staff shortages, the appointment had been delayed by 12 weeks.

• Peter was taken to a child development clinic at St Ann’s Hospital in Tottenham, north London on August 1 2007. Paediatrician Dr Sabah Al-Zayyat decided she could not carry out a full check-up as the boy was “miserable and cranky”. A post-mortem examination later revealed Peter had probably already suffered a broken back and fractured ribs by this point. The following day police tell Connelly she will not be prosecuted. That evening, the child received the fatal last blow to the mouth, knocking his tooth out.

• The Health Board identified staff shortages, poor communication, insufficient training and failures to stick to correct procedures at Middlesex University Hospital NHS Trust, Haringey Teaching Primary Care Trust and Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Trust.

Guardian newspaper, Protecting Children and Young People from Harm and Abuse (2009) Kirwin Maclean Associates Ltd