Practice case review 5: Victoria Climbie

Victoria Climbie was born in November 1991 in the Ivory Coast. She died in February 2000 in London aged eight. To escape the poverty of Africa, her parents entrusted her to her great aunt who brought her to Europe. Victoria was tortured to death by that great-aunt, Marie Therese Kouao, and the woman’s boyfriend Carl Manning. Police, doctors, social workers all had contact with her while she was being abused. She had 128 injuries.

November 1998: Seven-year-old Victoria Adjo Climbie leaves Abobo in the Ivory Coast to live with her aunt, Marie-Therese Kouao initially in Paris. Kouao takes the girl to London after she is pursued by French authorities over benefit payments.

April - June 1999: On arrival in England, Victoria's name is given as Anna because of the assumed identity on the false passport used to get her into Europe. Kouao takes a job as a hospital cleaner and the pair initially live in a hostel in north London. Some weeks later Victoria is on a bus with her aunt when they meet Carl Manning, the driver, for the first time.

July 1999: Kouao and Victoria, who speaks no English, move into Carl Manning's home in Tottenham, north London. Within days, Victoria would be suffering abuse at the hands of Carl Manning. That abuse would lead to her torture and death.

14 July 1999: Victoria makes her first visit to the Central Middlesex Hospital after the daughter of her childminder suspects the girl has non-accidental injuries. The doctor accepts Kouao's story that Victoria has inflicted the wounds on herself by scratching at scabies sores. During this period, doctors alert child protection authorities as a precaution. Haringey social worker Lisa Arthurworrey and PC Karen Jones are assigned to the case. They later cancel a home visit scheduled for 4 August after hearing about the scabies.

24 July 1999: Victoria is taken to North Middlesex Hospital's casualty department with scalding to her head and face. Doctors immediately suspect that the injuries have been deliberately inflicted. Kouao tells Lisa Arthurworrey and PC Jones that she poured hot water over Victoria to try and stop her scratching her scalp. She says that Victoria caused other injuries with utensils.

6 August 1999: Victoria is discharged from the hospital and is collected by Kouao after her explanation for the injuries is accepted by child protection authorities.

October 1999: Trial evidence reveals that from October 1999 until the following January, Carl Manning forces Victoria to sleep in a bin liner in the bath every night at this flat.

1 November 1999: Kouao tells social workers that Carl Manning has sexually assaulted Victoria. She withdraws the accusation the next day. PC Jones is asked to investigate why but takes no further action after her letter to Kouao remains unanswered.

24 February 2000: Victoria is rushed to North Middlesex Hospital suffering from a combination of malnutrition and hypothermia. Doctors later transfer her to an intensive care ward at St Mary's Hospital in west London.

25 February 2000: Victoria is declared dead at 3.15pm at St Mary's Hospital.
Dr Nathaniel Carey, the Home Office pathologist who examines her body, found 128 separate injuries and scars, many of them cigarette burns, and described them as “the worst case of child abuse I’ve encountered”.

The Laming Inquiry made over 100 recommendations. Evidence heard showed the agencies had failed to protect Victoria.

When consultant paediatrician, Dr Mary Schwartz, saw Victoria at the Central Middlesex Hospital, she decided her cuts were due to the skin disease scabies. Victoria was sent home to her abusers. Dr Schwartz told the Laming inquiry she assumed social services would investigate further. Two weeks later Victoria was back in hospital - this time the North Middlesex. Consultant Dr Mary Rossiter felt Victoria was being abused but she confused colleagues by writing “able to discharge” on her notes. Victoria was again sent home to her abusers.

The inquiry heard how PC Karen Jones failed to inspect Victoria's home for fear of catching scabies off the furniture. She said: “It might not be logical but I did not know anything about scabies.”

Lisa Arthurworrey was Victoria’s social worker and one of a number from Haringey Council blamed for failing her. Ms Arthurworrey felt she has been made a scapegoat. At the inquiry she painted a picture of child protection in Haringey as chaotic, with workers in conflict. She attacked several colleagues and described supervisions with her manager, Carole Baptiste. She said: “Ms Baptiste used most of the time to talk about her experiences as a black woman and her relationship with God.”

Esther Ackha a distant relative of Victoria’s great aunt, Marie Therese told the inquiry she made two anonymous calls to Brent council reporting fears for Victoria’s safety. Nothing effective was done.

Priscilla Cameron was Victoria’s childminder. It was Priscilla and her daughter, Avril, who had Victoria admitted to the Central Middlesex Hospital - only to get her wounds diagnosed as scabies.

During police interviews Carl Manning and Marie Therese Kouao both claimed that Victoria was possessed. Manning and Kouao were found guilty of her murder. Sentencing both of them to life imprisonment, Judge Richard Hawkins says: “What Anna endured was truly unimaginable. She died at both your hands, a lonely drawn out death.”