

Peter Sidebotham offers biblical guidance on a complex issue

# Child protection

In the field of child protection, the pendulum of public, and perhaps more importantly, media opinion seems to be swaying uncontrollably, and consequently quite dangerously, at the moment. A year ago, Lord Laming published his inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié.<sup>1</sup> Lord Laming highlighted the seriousness of the extreme end of child abuse and emphasised that child abuse should be treated with the same rigour as any other potentially life-threatening disease. Professionals were blamed for not listening to the child, for missing signs of abuse and for poor communication. Perhaps above all, many professionals at all levels were blamed for not accepting responsibility for their role in the child protection process.

Now, less than a year later, we have seen prominent paediatricians brought before the GMC because of concerns about their actions in diagnosing child abuse, the overturning of three cases where mothers were convicted of having murdered their babies, and a review of a huge number of cases, both criminal and civil, where expert evidence has influenced the legal process in suspected child abuse.<sup>2,3,4</sup> So what are we to make of these swings in opinion? What are the likely impacts on children, families and professionals? And can we find ways of working that avoid some of the difficulties that have been highlighted?

Professionals working in the child protection field have always been vulnerable and open to criticism. That has been seen before in situations such as the Cleveland Inquiry, and in the numerous public inquiries into the deaths of children from abuse. My perception is that this vulnerability is, at least amongst paediatricians, but probably also on a much wider basis, even more marked now than ever before. There is a general perception that 'you are damned if you do and damned if you don't'. One direct consequence of this is that we are already seeing reluctance amongst many professionals to get involved in this area.<sup>5</sup> The potential knock on effect of this is that with fewer professionals entering the field, or being prepared to take on child protection work as part of their remit, child abuse could be missed, or inadequately assessed, and children could be put at greater risk. There is also a specific issue in relation to expert evidence. Few of these cases are clear-cut, and there is always the need for professional opinions, based on the best available evidence. Where that evidence is limited, as it too often is in this field, the courts will necessarily have to rely on conjecture and individual expert opinions. Again, fewer professionals are now prepared to stick their necks out and offer their opinions for fear of being pilloried one way or another. Again the consequences are likely to be detrimental to children, with more prolonged or inconclusive legal proceedings.

The problem here seems to lie more with the systems we have for dealing with these complex cases than with the individuals who are currently being blamed. That, I believe gives hope for significant change. A lot is happening in the wake of Lord Laming's inquiry and the publication of the green paper *Every Child Matters*<sup>6</sup> and the recent *Children Bill*,<sup>7</sup> with improved systems for multi-agency working, information sharing, training and audit. But there is still a lot to be done, both in national debates and policy, and in local implementation. As Christians we need to be engaged at all levels, influencing debates and developments.

For those of us who are working with children and families, I believe

the biblical advice in Micah 6:8 provides perhaps the best principles for our personal and professional approach to the field. Micah suggests that the Lord requires three things of us:

**To act justly.** We must work for justice, seeking to promote the truth, and to speak out on behalf of the vulnerable. Primarily we need to keep the welfare of children paramount, even more so for those who are particularly vulnerable: the disabled, those from ethnic minorities, asylum seekers, those living in poverty. But we also need to remember that many parents too are vulnerable. We need to seek integrity in our legal systems and in the procedures we use to protect and safeguard children. If a parent is wrongly convicted of murdering their child, that is one of the gravest miscarriages of justice that can occur and a double tragedy for the family concerned. However, if a child dies because of professional or societal failures to protect that child, that is even more of a tragedy. To minimise the risks of either tragedy occurring, we need a clear framework and approaches that recognise the paramount importance of the welfare of the child, whilst also recognising the needs of families. There is a need for a wider debate on whether criminal conviction is necessarily the best response to suspected infanticide.<sup>8,9</sup>

**To love mercy.** Compassion needs to be the bedrock of all our work: compassion for children, for families and even for abusing parents. They too may be victims.<sup>10</sup> It is not always easy to balance justice and compassion, but I believe it can be done. When confronted with inadequate or harmful parenting, we should not be afraid to remove children if that will be in their best interests, but perhaps we should more often be asking 'what is needed to enable these parents to look after this child?' rather than 'can these parents look after this child?'

**To walk humbly with our God.** Our personal and professional lives need to be marked by humility and righteousness. We all make mistakes and need to be prepared to admit it. We need to recognise our limitations, but within that to do our best to act with integrity. Above all, we mustn't be afraid to engage in these difficult areas, trusting in a God who walks with us as encourager, friend and guide.

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## References

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