

Lindsay, Sharon

From: Mulhern, Kevin
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To: Gowdy, Clive; Campbell, Dr Henrietta; Carson, Ian; McCarthy, Miriam; Burne, Alison; Lindsay, Sharon; Shannon, Colm
Subject: impartial reporter story this week

'Watchdog' body to look at Lucy's case

The death of 17-month-old Lucy Crawford as a result of errors in her treatment at the Erne Hospital is being investigated by the Western Health and Social Services Council. Described as a "watchdog" organisation, it was the intervention of the Council's former chief officer, Stanley Millar, which finally led to an inquest on Lucy. However, at the Council's monthly meeting in Irvinestown views were expressed that it was a watchdog that could bark but had no bite; it had neither power nor authority and simply operated in an advisory capacity. The 24-member Council is appointed by the Health Minister and includes individuals with an interest in health issues and 10 district councillors, among them Fermanagh's Harold Andrews, of the Ulster Unionists, and Paddy Gilgunn, of Sinn Fein. Lucy's death was on the agenda for last Thursday's meeting but when Mr. Millar's successor, Maggie Reilly, arrived late, she and the chairman, Raymond Rogan, went into the corridor and had a short discussion. Immediately on his return the chairman advised members that since the agenda was drawn up "circumstances have developed that would make it inappropriate" to discuss the matter. "In future there will be a full report on what has transpired," he promised. After the meeting he was asked what had prompted the decision not to discuss Lucy's death. He replied: "All the issues had not been resolved. Until they are it's very difficult for us to have a discussion. It would serve no useful purpose to discuss this issue until we were aware of all the facts." Mrs. Reilly explained that following Lucy's inquest she had been contacted by the chief executive of the Sperrin Lakeland Trust, Hugh Mills, representing management at the Erne Hospital. He had offered to appraise her of the situation. "We had a fairly full and frank meeting. We were able to raise a number of issues and concerns," said Mrs. Reilly. She is seeking a meeting with the Chief Medical Officer for Northern Ireland, Dr. Henreitta Campbell, and the Western Health and Social Services Board. "It's part of the process of us being informed. There's a number of people we have to talk to," she said. She would also like to meet Lucy's parents, Neville and Mae Crawford. "I'm very conscious of the fact that we are talking about their child," Mrs. Reilly stated. Commenting on the issues she said there was an obligation on the Trust, where there has been a major incident, to explain the background, what led to the child's death, how the Trust responded and what has been learned to ensure it does not happen again. "We have to ensure this never, never happens again," she stressed. She said the Council was struck by the fact that there had been no obligation to report such incidents to the Chief Medical Officer. Members thought that if major incidents and "near misses" were reported the Department of Health would have an overview and be able to spot any problems. She expressed the Council's concern about the way the Crawford family was dealt with. "The family instinctively felt there was something wrong. That concern must be respected by both the medical profession and the management of the health services and must be dealt with promptly and appropriately. There's quite a bit to be learned from that," she added. Mrs. Reilly said that far too often parents are not listened to when they express concerns about their child's care. In this particular case: "The lack of understanding and humanity about the parents' anxiety left a lot to be desired, from my understanding. I think that has to change. I think there has to be a major learning point in all of this." She wants to see a situation whereby, when there is a major incident, such as the death of a child, there is "full and open and honest discussion with the most senior care provider at the time. I think that just has to be a standard. I think that's the standard we should expect." She said that when parents raised a concern about the care of their child during treatment or particularly after a death, the most senior clinician involved must make themselves available to the parents and appraise them of what is going to happen and involve them in the review of the case and give them a voice in that review. Mrs. Reilly said that unfortunately the culture of litigation instilled a fear "that just closes the shutters down." She said most parents were not thinking of litigation, they just wanted answers, even if the answer was: "I don't know, but we are doing our bit to find out and will keep you apprised to the best of our ability." She pointed out that exclusion and secrecy just added to the distress. Later in the meeting, while discussing another issue, Mrs. Reilly said there was a public misconception about what the Council could do. She said it had neither power nor authority. "The only power we do have is to raise the issue within the public arena," she stated. "Do the public even know we exist," she wondered. She said there needed to be a debate about the need for a watchdog organisation. The vice-chairman, Paddy McGowan, said: "We are described and seen by the Department as an advisory body." Mrs. Reilly agreed: "At the end of the day that's what we are." She said that public expectations had grown dramatically and at some point the Council had to match that expectation. According to the Health and Personal Social Services web site the Councils are: "independent consumer organisations" with "a duty to represent the public's views and interests, to review the work of health and social services and to recommend any improvements needed." The Council plans to discuss Lucy's death at its next monthly meeting which is scheduled for May 27, at the Library Headquarters in Omagh.