

A tragedy that must never happen again

The Northern Ireland Health Minister, Angela Smith has entered the public debate of the death of Lucy Crawford, insisting that it is her aim that tragedies like this should never happen again.

In an exclusive interview with the Impartial Reporter, the Minister concedes that there are questions about how the Sperrin Lakeland Trust handled the case, but she is pinning her faith on the Trust's new review to restore public confidence.

It would seem to be a high-risk strategy on the Minister's behalf, given the lack of public credibility in the Trust.

Lucy Crawford, the 17-month-old daughter of Neville and Mae Crawford from Letterbreen, died in April 2000 as a result of disastrous errors in the management of her drip when she went into the Erne Hospital with a straightforward tummy bug.

The doctor in charge of the case and a senior nurse are now understood to be on long-term sick leave. This doctor, paediatrician Dr Jarlath O'Donaghue has been reported to the General Medical Council for alleged serious professional misconduct.

While local people accept that mistakes can be made, the scandal is that over four years on, no proper explanation has been given as to what happened. And the Trust has managed the situation dreadfully from the beginning; not only in their dealings with the family, but in their internal investigation which proved a whitewash.

So, can they be trusted to investigate properly this time?

The Minister appears to be prepared to at least give them the benefit of the doubt.

I asked the Minister if she had faith in the Trust:

"I think for the moment, yes. If I didn't I would come down quite heavily and ask them to look at it again," said Ms Smith. "What I have faith in is the root cause analysis they're going to do now. There are clearly questions and things that happened initially that caused great concern, but if we look now at the root cause analysis, I am confident it will be thorough and will give us all the information we need to move forward."

The Minister described Lucy's death as a "terrible, terrible tragedy" and said it was crucial to move forward.

"What seems to be crucial in my estimation is that this never happens again, that we learn lessons," she said.

At times, our interview went round in circles as I pressed the point that there was a serious credibility problem in the Trust investigating themselves, having failed so badly before.

Said Ms Smith: "You say there is an issue of a lack of trust. Clearly when the first review was undertaken, it could have been handled better. I think the way the Trust dealt with the parents could certainly have been

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handled much, much better. These were parents who lost a much-loved child," the Minister added, criticising particularly the Trust's poor communication with the family.

Last week, the Trust issued a statement announcing a new procedure called a "root cause analysis". The steering group will be chaired by a Trust director, Jenny Irvine and its members will include another Trust director, Diana Day-Cody and a representative from the Western Health Board.

However, one of the doctors from another Trust in the Board area produced a report on Lucy's death in 2000 which was at such variance to the expert opinion at her inquest this year that the Coroner wrote to his employers seeking clarification.

It has also understood that the Chief Officer of the Western Health and Social Services Council has refused to sit on the new steering group. The Council is the monitoring body, which despite its limited powers, is supposed to look after the public's interest. If their Chief Officer considers the steering group set-up to be so tainted, one has to ask how much confidence the public can have in it.

Following their announcement of the new steering group last week, the Trust have hardly been forthcoming with information in response the questions clarifying the position.

They could not, for example, say whether the report would be made public or even shared with the Crawford family.

"The Steering Group will be agreeing distribution of the report. However, the report and recommendations will be presented to the clinical and social care governance committee which is open to the public and media," was all they would say in response to that question.

Ms Smith insists that the new process is not an internal one; they will have a range of outside independent expertise call on. But, I asked, why not have a completely independent inquiry to restore confidence.

"I am not setting my face against an independent inquiry. I think we need to look to the future and get all the information we need, and I think we can get it in this way," she added.

"The other thing I am concerned about is the impact this is having on the morale of our staff, nurses and doctors, who undoubtedly across Northern Ireland are doing a good job for the people of Northern Ireland. They are as upset as anyone about what has happened, they are trying to do their jobs in very difficult circumstances," she said.

It is an important point; it is right to stress that the Erne Hospital is a fine one with many dedicated staff.

The point is that all the good staff are being let down by management who are refusing to investigate properly the serious mistakes of the few.

It will be interesting to see if the Minister continues to have faith in the Sperrin Lakeland Trust. Given their track record, hopes cannot be high

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that they will offer up the truth.

What then Minister?

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