

Child abuse: stop the collusion and enhance the protection

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Last week, the Catholic Church in Ireland was unceremoniously catapulted into the news headlines by yet another report that detailed its shameful involvement in child abuse. A report last May¹ had shocked the world by detailing the scale of such abuse—over the past few decades, more than 30 000 children were raped, beaten, and molested by priests and nuns in Catholic-church-run schools and orphanages. On Nov 26, the publication of another report² showed how Catholic Bishops in Dublin repeatedly ignored the perpetrators' despicable actions so as not to damage the Church's reputation. As if the collusion of Bishops was not bad enough, senior police officers were also complicit in these crimes by handing any complaints of abuse on to the Archdiocese instead of investigating them further. And the victims of the abuse are to be dishonoured once again, as no one involved in the corrupt cover-up will be prosecuted.

The two reports make shocking reading but what is even more appalling is that the Irish scandal is not unique. All over the world, millions of children are currently being physically and sexually abused by those in a position of power over them while governments, professionals, family, and communities deliberately look the other way. Culture, fear, ignorance, disinterest, stigmatisation, and reputational risk are just a few of the factors that help to ensure that child abuse remains a secret and silent epidemic. The west African word, *muslaha* (the nearest translation is "ignore and compromise"), accurately describes the situation, especially where such abuse might conform to the cultural norm.

Despite the Catholic Church's failings, it did eventually cooperate with the Irish Government's 3-year investigation and handed over 60 000 previously secret files. However, in many countries, governments are too busy focusing on Millennium Development Goal 4 (to reduce child mortality by two-thirds by 2015) to have the time, energy, and resources to tackle the quality of life of their surviving children. But although overwhelming, the situation is certainly not hopeless. Some countries are beginning to give child abuse the attention it deserves. For example, Pakistan has recently opened a Child Protection Unit at Lahore Children's Hospital.³ A quarter of the hospital's staff have now been trained in recognising abuse and neglect.

Without disclosure, accurate and evidence-based clinical diagnosis of abuse is imperative if maltreated children are to receive the medical care, support, and protection they need. Of course, diagnosing abuse is not an end in itself but it is a crucial first step that puts health professionals at the frontline of child protection. Yet health professionals often miss the signs and symptoms of abuse.⁴

Health workers need to be specifically trained in how to examine children suspected of being abused, and also in how to accurately document any findings. For example, in the UK, an educational programme, produced by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and the Advanced Life Support Group, aims to equip doctors in training with the necessary knowledge and skills to enable them to competently recognise and respond to child-protection situations.⁵ Additionally, the humanitarian organisation Maternal and Childhealth Advocacy International⁶ has produced an evidence-based manual for doctors working in poorly resourced countries on how to diagnose child physical and sexual abuse.

While national legislation and UN Conventions, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child,⁷ have their place, the training of health professionals in recognising, diagnosing, and recording child physical and sexual abuse is a practical and pragmatic step towards protecting children. Health professionals at the national level are also uniquely placed to lead in advocating for the establishment of multidisciplinary systems to protect their country's abused children.

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- 1 Ireland's Commission. Commission to inquire into child abuse. May, 2009. <http://www.childabusecommission.ie> (accessed Nov 29, 2009).
- 2 Commission of Investigation. Report by Commission of Investigation into Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin. Nov 26, 2009. <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/PB09000504> (accessed Nov 29, 2009).
- 3 Solberg KE. Protecting Pakistan's children. *Lancet* 2009; **374**: 106.
- 4 Gilbert R, Kemp A, Thoburn J, et al. Recognising and responding to child maltreatment. *Lancet* 2009; **373**: 167–80.
- 5 Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health. Recognition & response in child maltreatment. <http://www.rcpch.ac.uk/Education/Education-Courses-and-Programmes/Safeguarding-Children> (accessed Nov 29, 2009).
- 6 Maternal & Childhealth Advocacy International. Welcome to MCAI (Maternal & Childhealth Advocacy International). <http://caiuk.org> (accessed Nov 29, 2009).
- 7 UN. Convention on the Rights of the Child. 1989. <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm> (accessed Nov 29, 2009).