

Doctors "fail to spot child abuse", says report

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Doctors and social workers are still not spotting abused children who end up in hospital after abuse or neglect by their parents, according to a government-funded inquiry.

The report is from the National Children's Bureau (NCB) and shows that some children are discharged from casualty departments and allowed to go home despite suspicious injuries such as a black eye or broken arm, because they are not identified as being at risk.

Doctors and nurses claim that specialist social workers are overworked and often reluctant to intervene, even if it is thought children are likely to suffer further harm. For their part, social workers told researchers they were 'frustrated with medical staff who were not prepared to make a decision about whether a child's injury was accidental or not' because they did not want to be the one that 'labelled' a family as abusive.

The NCB report says that many hospitals and social workers have not implemented changes brought in after the horrific abuse and murder of eight-year-old Victoria Climbié in 2000. It comes as new figures show that hospitals in England treat on average 471 children every week who have sustained deliberate injuries. There were 24,497 such cases among under-18s in 2005-06, involving injuries such as a black eye or broken arm. They involved a total of 21,334 children, some of whom were seen more than once. The identities of those thought responsible for the assaults were not recorded, but they include other young people as well as parents, relatives and childminders.

Tracey Emmott is a specialist child abuse lawyer with Pictons of Luton and she is concerned at the results of the survey.

'It paints a picture of tension, mistrust and disputes between the professionals who are meant to raise the alarm if they suspect abuse or neglect' she says. 'Its findings show that lessons have not been learnt widely enough since Lord Laming's inquiry in 2003 into the Climbié case.

'According to the NSPCC, one child is killed by its parents every week. No child should be left to suffer because their abuse has been overlooked by a hospital, but there remains a grave risk that it will continue to happen unless and until those working with children improve their vigilance and take appropriate action.'

Last week James Craig, 26, and Sharma Dookhooah, 25, of Romford, Essex, were each jailed for five years after admitting causing or allowing the death of their 10-month-old son Neo. Their Old Bailey trial heard that there had been a series of failings by police, doctors and social workers who knew about the boy's 'derelict' home life but did not intervene, despite a number of warnings.

The NCB's year-long survey of child protection arrangements at 130 hospitals also found that fewer than half had a dedicated team of children's social workers based on-site, even though the Department of Health said in 2003 that they should. Local safeguarding boards, with NHS, police and local authority representatives, were established across England last year to improve child protection systems and review child deaths.