

Incest isn't history. It's happening here, right now

By Terry Prone

We thought it was history. We took comfort in believing it was history. Or we thought it might, occasionally, still happen in Britain. We never thought that incest, repeated rape and constant violence could be visited on children in this country in this decade.

Now we know how wrong we were. In one part of this country, the children in one cluster of horror called a family suffered incest by their mother. A 12-year-old was raped by his father once a week -- with the mother's knowledge. Abuse isn't an adequate word for it. Nor is the soft-hearted notion that the boy had some of his childhood stolen from him. That 12-year-old had his adulthood stolen from him, too. No amount of counselling will ever erase the mistrust, the confusion, the agony he went through, or fit him for happy open relationships in his 20s, 30s and beyond.

Throughout the enquiries into clerical child sex abuse, again and again the observation was made that nine out of 10 cases, where children were raped or otherwise molested at home, the perpetrator was a member of the family or extended family. But whenever that comment was made, it was heard as an excuse for the priests who mauled children. It wasn't. It was a dire warning to all of us, as relatives, neighbours, teachers, social workers and -- yes -- judges, that families can be cesspits of filth and fear for children and that each of us has a duty to watch for the signs: the downcast eyes, the odd reactions on the child's part.

In the case of the 12-year-old rape victim, social workers copped on to at least some of what was happening.

The local health board went to court to try to take the child and his siblings into care. No health board does that lightly. No social worker recommends the taking of children into care lightly.

It's an axiom of modern social work that taking a child out of even a fairly dysfunctional family can be more damaging to the kid than leaving him or her at home and trying to provide interventions that will ease the pressure.

In this case, though, the social workers knew that what was going on went way, WAY beyond the merely dysfunctional. They made a brave, difficult decision.

Their bosses took action on their recommendation.

And then the mother -- the mother we now know to be serving a seven-year sentence for incest -- went to the High Court to prevent the children being taken into care.

The fact that this grossly unfit mother succeeded in her misuse of the law led to the continued visitation of horror on her child should cause us to re-examine