

Lessons learnt following the death of Matilde

MATILDE

Matilde's friends described her as a tiny, petite woman who was chatty, funny and loved to laugh. She enjoyed going out with her friends. Like most people, she had her "*ups and downs*", but she was always very "*positive*". Matilde was described by her friends as a wonderful friend and a loving mother. She adored her children and would do anything for them. She worked hard to support her children and provide for them. Her husband, Nigel, also told professionals that she was a good mother.

This review established that it was likely that Matilde was a victim of domestic abuse. Professionals however did not give her the opportunity to explain what was happening in her world. Professionals appeared to give greater credence to her husband's explanations than to Matilde's. Indeed, despite three (third party) calls to the police describing her husband as a victim of domestic abuse, no professional met with Matilde or her children to ascertain the veracity of the allegations.

Matilde was disadvantaged and vulnerable in a number of ways. For example, although she was a British national, she originated from overseas and therefore English was not her first language. She was caring for her children and was isolated from her family who lived overseas and her family was therefore not able to provide practical support. Matilde also described being financially controlled. These vulnerabilities and disadvantages were never identified. They were never identified because professionals did not respond appropriately to the allegations of domestic abuse. Had professionals spoken with all members of the family at an early stage, Matilde may have been offered the support and advice she so clearly needed.

LEARNING POINTS FROM THE REVIEW

1. THE NEED FOR CURIOSITY ABOUT FAMILY HISTORY, RELATIONSHIPS AND CURRENT CIRCUMSTANCES THAT MOVES BEYOND RELIANCE ON SELF-REPORTED INFORMATION

Throughout professionals' contact with Matilde's husband, no attempt was made to speak to Matilde or her children to verify what was happening within the family. Professionals need to move beyond self-reported information so they can triangulate, question and corroborate information.

In this case the lack of curiosity meant that no one ever questioned who was the perpetrator and who was the victim. Professionals simply accepted the information that was provided.

2. THE NEED TO CONSIDER THE LINK BETWEEN DOMESTIC ABUSE ALLEGATIONS AND SAFEGUARDING RESPONSIBILITIES

Both Matilde and her husband disclosed domestic abuse to various professionals. These disclosures did not result in the needs of the children being considered and assessed. Professionals always need to consider their responsibilities towards children who may be living in households affected by domestic abuse.

3. THE NEED TO CHALLENGE INFORMATION AND PRECONCEPTIONS

Both police and children's social care were provided with third party information that should have been challenged. Matilde and her children were not spoken with and therefore her husband's account of events was believed and not challenged. Normally, professionals should meet all those involved in the reports of domestic abuse. As this was not done, and Nigel's version of events was not challenged, professionals were not in a position to make informed decisions

This lack of challenge could be viewed as a pro-male, pro-white bias where white men/white people are viewed as more rational, civilised and stable etc. Although this bias may have been unconscious, research shows that women are three times more likely than men to be arrested when they were construed as the perpetrator of domestic abuse.¹ Furthermore, arrest rates for women from black and mixed ethnic groups are twice as high as those for white women.² Thus professionals should challenge their preconceptions and consider unconscious bias.

4. THE NEED TO RECOGNISE THAT INDIVIDUALS WHOSE FIRST LANGUAGE IS NOT ENGLISH MAY REQUIRE ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

It was clear from agencies' records that Matilde had a good command of English. However, when she was distressed she struggled to express herself. Professionals need to recognise that individuals may require additional support at distressing or difficult times – as they will often revert to their first language.

This case also showed that Matilde did not have a full understanding of how agencies work in the United Kingdom. For example, her husband told her that because she was not English, he would get "control" the children. She appeared to believe this and it may have made her more hesitant to seek help.

5. THE NEED TO OFFER VULNERABLE INDIVIDUALS THE CONTACT DETAILS OF CULTURALLY SPECIFIC SUPPORT SERVICES THAT CAN PROVIDE ADVICE, HELP AND SUPPORT TO VICTIMS FROM MINORITY ETHNIC COMMUNITIES

Matilde would have benefitted from advice from a culturally specific support service. This could have provided her with the opportunity to discuss any problems or concerns with an advocate in her first language. Professionals should routinely offer to provide the contact details of culturally specific support services to individuals from minority ethnic communities.

¹ Hester, M. Portrayal of Women as Intimate Partner Domestic Violence Perpetrators, Sage Journals September 2012 – accessed online @ www.journals.sagepub.com 20 January 2018

² The Lammy Review: An independent review into the treatment of, and outcomes for, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic individuals in the Criminal Justice System and Ministry of Justice, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic disproportionality in the Criminal Justice System in England and Wales, table 5.1 (2016) – <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/black-asian-and-minority-ethnic-disproportionality-in-the-criminal-justice-system-in-england-and-wales>