

**PAEDIATRIC FORENSIC EXAMINERS****Joint Report of the Chief Constable, Clerk and Treasurer**

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**1 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

The purpose of the report is to seek approval for funding towards the establishment of a managed network of forensically trained consultant paediatricians to cater for the medical and evidence gathering issues presented by child victims of acute sexual assault.

**2 BACKGROUND**

For evidential purposes, medical examinations and assessments of children subjected to sexual abuse, neglect and serious physical abuse, should always be carried out by a consultant paediatrician. Similarly, all medical examinations in respect of allegations of acute sexual assault (i.e. having occurred in the preceding 72 hours), should be conducted by a forensically trained paediatrician.

A forensically trained paediatrician is one who is trained in evidence gathering techniques and is competent to give evidence regarding their findings. It has become increasingly difficult to encourage such professionals to continue in the forensic field and to bring new recruits into this arena. Many have been subject to extensive public scrutiny, which has left them feeling vulnerable and professionally isolated. They are under no professional obligation to provide forensic services, and are motivated to do so by their desire to act in the best interests of the child victim.

**3 CURRENT POSITION**

The Women Doctors' rota scheme provides an out-of-hours service for forensic examinations of female victims of rape or acute sexual assault. This scheme, which is aligned to the REACH Centre, was intended to service the needs of adult victims. However, it became clear that a number of the females being seen were under 16 years of age and, as the doctors on the scheme were not paediatricians, they did not have the required specialist skills to deal with the complex issues raised in examining child victims of abuse.

As the vast majority of victims of sexual abuse opt to be examined by a female doctor, it was recognised that female paediatricians were the only group of professionals with the requisite skills for this work. A call out rota of female paediatricians therefore evolved, with the doctors operating as volunteers rather than being retained as Force Medical Examiners. Examinations take place at the specially designed, fully equipped and child friendly Lindisfarne Centre at the Royal Victoria Infirmary (RVI), Newcastle. Once trained to gather and interpret evidence from examinations, these doctors played an invaluable part in mounting successful prosecutions for child abuse cases.

The female paediatrician's call out rota operates in the evening only, and the number of forensic paediatricians prepared to be regularly included on the rota has fluctuated in the past year between one and five. Five is the barely sustainable minimum, and one leaves the system at breaking point.

The paucity of available forensic paediatricians over recent months has led to REACH doctors reluctantly agreeing to temporarily provide a service to 14 to 16 year old victims of sexual abuse.

### **3 PROPOSAL**

Since May 2003, the Northumberland and Tyne and Wear Strategic Health Authority has been conducting a review of arrangements for paediatric assessment (including forensic examination) of children following an allegation of acute sexual assault. Northumbria Police has fully co-operated with this review, along with all Health Authorities and relevant health professionals in the Force area, the Social Services Inspectorate, Area Child Protection Committees and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS).

The review concluded that the current system of providing this service on a voluntary 'good will' basis is untenable, and that the solution is to develop a clinical network for paediatric assessments for acute sexual assault, managed by Gateshead Health Trust and based at the Lindisfarne Centre at the RVI, Newcastle. This would be supported by additional investment into the network to develop a comprehensive National Health Service (NHS) forensic service. The network would provide opportunities to support other paediatricians involved in examinations for chronic child sexual abuse.

Under the proposals made by the Strategic Health Authority, daytime access for any children who require an assessment, following an acute sexual assault, would be provided at a four hour clinic run five days a week at the Lindisfarne Centre. An on-call arrangement for the other 148 hours of the week would be built into the consultants' contracts.

This would guarantee the availability of a forensically trained consultant paediatrician and ensure compliance with the Guidance on Paediatric Forensic Examinations in Relation to Possible Child Sexual Abuse, published by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health and the Association of Police Surgeons. This Guidance recommends allocation of designated time for learning, sharing of knowledge (including in respect of clinical governance issues) between members, promoting of good practice and peer review being built into clinician's job plans.

The proposal from the Strategic Health Authority is that the costs of morning clinic sessions (£143,000 p.a.) would be met by the NHS, whilst the cost of the on-call arrangements (£48,000 p.a.) and the monthly meetings for the consultant paediatricians (£29,000 p.a.) would be met by Northumbria Police Authority. During the meetings the consultants undertake peer review, forensic training, spread best practice and consult with the police and CPS.

Northumbria Police presently has budgetary provision of £27,000 to meet the costs of the current arrangements. Under the proposal from the Strategic Health Authority, the estimated cost to be met by the Police Authority would be £77,000, an increase of £50,000.

**4 EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IMPLICATIONS**

Nil.

**5 HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS**

Nil.

**6 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The Treasurer confirms that the increase in costs can be met from the growth included in the 2004/05 revenue budget.

**7 RECOMMENDATION**

Members are asked to approve the funding proposal as outlined.