

Savile – a commentary

The revelations about the late Jimmy Savile have become one of the most startling sexual abuse stories of the last decade. At its heart there are a number of challenging issues, some quite paradoxical, that make the whole picture difficult to comprehend.

The first challenge relates to the 24-hour news coverage of the unfolding story and the unprecedented access we have to associated information. As a result it is striking that despite, or possibly because, of the deluge of information, it is extremely difficult for all but the most diligent reader either to understand what has happened or to make any analysis of events. Headlines and selective quotes in the media leave an impression but not necessarily a clear understanding.

So, for example, Savile is now described routinely in media narratives as a 'predatory, serial sex offender'. The report from which it is taken actually says '*Accounts from victims have left police and NSPCC staff with the unambiguous view that Savile's behaviour was that of a predatory sex offender who opportunely abused people*' (NSPCC, 2013, Para 9.5).

What the police describe is 214 crimes being recorded across 28 police force areas, which the press has reported as though they are proven offences. The terminology adopted is that of conviction, whereas in fact these are allegations and the police state that the information (on which they are based) has not been corroborated, as corroboration would be considered disproportionate because criminal proceedings cannot now be brought because Savile is dead.

None of this is to doubt victim reports, or to disagree with the NSPCC and police opinion that Savile was a serious, serial sex offender. Indeed, having read the reports, it is one with which I am inclined to agree. However, it is important to be aware that it is just that, an opinion.

Our unclear perspective is then compounded by the previously widespread and positive perception of Savile now being confounded by these recent revelations. Thus we have a man who was described on his death by Jeremy Hunt, then the minister for culture, media and sport, in glowing terms as someone who would leave 'a lasting legacy'. In stark contrast to what he meant at the time, the legacy that Hunt has now inherited as Health Secretary is to be responsible for the ongoing inquiries in the NHS outlined below. So, we have a situation where a man whose public standing was such that his funeral attracted thousands of mourners to the streets of Leeds is now believed to be one of the most prolific sex offenders of recent times.

When the detail is considered the picture becomes even more challenging. For example, part of the main NHS inquiry will be into how Savile was appointed to oversee a management review of Broadmoor Hospital, a high security mental health setting where it is now believed he also abused. A key question, regardless of what has now been revealed, must be on what basis

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was the appointment of a TV presenter and a part-time, unqualified hospital volunteer to such an important professional senior management task made, and in what way was that influenced by the widespread support it attracted at the time? It is not sensible to speculate ahead of a report that will have access to the facts, but some insight into what appears to have been a bizarre process can be found in recent newspaper reports at (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/jimmy-savile/9623089/Jimmy-Savile-Questions-for-Edwina-Currie-and-the-BBC.html>).

And finally there is such a wide range of organisations, from the Crown Prosecution Service and the police to children's homes, hospitals, a hospice and, of course, the BBC that all seem to have failed at some level, it must be concluded that, far from seeing a series of individual failings, there would appear to be systemic problems with the way in which we are organised to protect those who might be vulnerable, which increasingly seems to be any of us, from abuse in organisations.

The picture was further confused for the casual observer by the two crises at the BBC when a *Newsnight* investigation into allegations about Savile was not broadcast and then shortly afterward allegations about a senior Conservative party politician were broadcast in what quickly transpired to be a case of mistaken identity - and very shoddy journalism. The enquiries into these episodes are amongst those which will be summarised in a future NOTA News.

In the media fuelled furore which has erupted over various aspects of these tragic events what is too easily lost is hard fact on which to base analysis and, ultimately, measured action to prevent future occurrences. This ongoing series of summaries in NOTA News is designed to facilitate that process for NOTA members at least.

What follows therefore is a timeline intended to help understand the sequence of events; a list of the enquiries which have been published to date and those which are known to be due. The next NOTA News will have summaries of the key findings of the reports published to date. A link to a fuller version of the timeline can be found in the online version of NOTA News and can be accessed via the NOTA News webpage on the NOTA website.

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