Pathologist stands by his findings in Sally Clark case

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

The pathologist whose failure to disclose the results of microbiology tests on Harry, the baby son of Sally Clark, led the appeal court to quash her convictions for killing him and his brother, last week stood by his findings that there was no evidence of acute infection or inflammation in Harry's case.

Home Office forensic pathologist Alan Williams was giving evidence at the General Medical Council, where he faces charges of serious professional misconduct.

Mrs Clark was jailed for life for murdering 8 week old Harry in 1998 and 12 week old Christopher in 1996. She was freed by the Court of Appeal in 2003 after serving more than three years.

The court quashed the convictions as "unsafe" after hearing that the microbiology tests on Harry found *Staphylococcus aureus* in var-

ious sites of his body, including the cerebrospinal fluid.

Dr Williams said that he still believed, as he had noted after the postmortem examination on Harry, that there was no evidence of acute infection or inflammation: "That was my opinion then and remains my opinion." Dr Williams, aged 58, is accused of failing to discharge his duty as an expert witness, acting beyond his competence, and failing in specific areas of the postmortem examinations on both babies.

The appeal court judges who quashed Mrs Clark's conviction said that Dr Williams' failure to alert prosecution and defence lawyers to the test results had created a "significant risk of a miscarriage of justice."

Dr Williams said that he sent specimens from Harry's body to a colleague, Alan Wills, a consultant

microbiologist, for testing and spoke to him about the investigations. "I think we used the term 'belt and braces'—we had better check these bacteria out for phage type and toxin production, just to be 100% certain that they were not significant to the cause of death."

Later, Dr Wills had told him "Well, they're nothing to worry about—it's contamination," he said. He had no remaining concerns because "all the results we have seen debated at length here were in my experience what you get in baby postmortems. You frequently get some bacteria in the cerebrospinal fluid, and protein and white cell counts are usually raised."

The closest he came in his report to mentioning the microbiology was saying, "There is no evidence of acute infection or inflammation." He thought that he had covered the matter with that wording.

Dr Williams said that he had assumed that others in the case had seen a copy of the microbiology results "because nobody had

been in touch with me saying, 'There are no microbiology results on this baby. Where are they?' I just assumed they had already seen them and, as I had said, they were not of any relevance."

When asked by James Turner, QC, representing Dr Williams, whether he had any reason to keep things secret, Dr Williams replied, "No. I do not benefit from somebody being found guilty. I do not have any pleasure in it. I do not see why I would need to keep it secret. I presented the evidence that I saw was the conclusive evidence at the time."

"The absence of inquiry about matters led me to believe at that time that they had access to all these matters, and particularly if you read the evidence of some of the experts, they were criticising me for things that I thought were perhaps not fair. It was surprising if they had not got the microbiology that they had not criticised me for the lack of microbiology."

The hearing has been adjourned until 20 April. □

Mother found guilty in case of fabricated illness

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

Procedures at the United Kingdom's leading children's hospital have been tightened after a mother killed her 9 year old son by spiking his hospital drip feed bottles with salt despite 24 hour nursing surveillance.

Petrina Stocker, aged 42, was sentenced to five years in prison last week for the manslaughter of her son David at Great Ormond Street Hospital, London, in what the court was told was a case of fabricated or induced illness, formerly known as Munchausen syndrome by proxy.

Ms Stocker had been suspected earlier of tampering with David's urine and vomit samples in a bid to draw attention to herself. Despite the surveillance, she was able to put 18 teaspoons of salt into two feed bottles stored in the ward kitchen in August 2001.

David had been admitted to the Great Ormond Street Hospital and to Oldchurch Hospital, Romford, Essex, several times with a debilitating illness that doctors could not diagnose.

The hospital planned to move him to a psychiatric ward where access to his mother would be more restricted. It is thought that spiking his feed was an attempt by Ms Stocker to stop the move.

Judge Gerald Gordon said that he had been told that Ms Stocker was not mentally ill but had a behavioural disorder that "I suspect would come as a surprise to most laymen."

Ms Stocker had a history of fabricating her own illnesses. She had tampered with a urine sample, claiming to be diabetic, and had falsely pretended to be infertile. In 1983 she had poured acid over her arms and face and claimed to have leukaemia.

All the agencies involved have admitted mistakes in their handling of the case, and new measures have been introduced at the hospital to protect children in future. Jane Collins, chief executive of Great Ormond Street Hospital, said, "With hindsight, there were things we

Petrina Stocker had a history of fabricating her own illnesses

should have done differently. We have worked hard with all other agencies in London to try to stop this ever happening again.

"In both David's admissions, concerns were raised by staff that some or all of David's symptoms were fabricated or induced illness. David was placed under 24 hour supervision by nursing staff on both admissions to the hospital, and indeed in the first admission this improved his health."

"Since David's death we have conducted a searching internal review, which drew on external experts. We have cooperated with the police and with all the

agency investigations designed to draw out the lessons of the case."

"Thirty four recommendations were made and have now been implemented. Feeds are now in tamper proof bottles and are stored in a locked fridge."

Dr Harvey Marcovitch, spokesman for the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, said, "The case demonstrates that Munchausen syndrome still exists in adults, that fabricated and induced illness in children exists, and that we shouldn't be misled by reports that these conditions don't exist." □