

6 pediatricians raised concerns about discredited Erie forensic nurse

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Rhonda Henderson, an Erie nurse trained to detect medical evidence of sexual assault, photographed a child's body and authored her expert report.

There were, she said, numerous abnormal findings that showed abuse. She listed the findings in explicit detail.

This report, unlike others, did not remain on the desk of a prosecutor or child-welfare worker -- officials who might have been unable to detect errors in Henderson's work, but who could have used the evidence to convict someone of a crime or remove a child from a home.

Instead, the report landed on the desk of a peer of Henderson, pediatrician Mary Carrasco, of Pittsburgh, who had been asked to give a second opinion. In the child's records, Carrasco and five of her colleagues said, they saw evidence of constipation, not sexual assault.

They also saw what could happen if Henderson's report were submitted, unchallenged, to a caseworker, a judge or a jury.

The consequences, the child abuse experts came to agree, would be "devastating."

Carrasco and her colleagues detailed their concerns in a March 30 letter to Erie County District Attorney Jack Daneri, who released it last week to the Erie Times-News. The letter triggered a review in Erie County and throughout northwestern Pennsylvania of cases that involved forensic medical examinations by Henderson, 48, a registered nurse who had worked at Saint Vincent Health Center.

'Disturbing' consequences

The March 30 letter is brief, stark and emphatic in its warning about what Carrasco and five other experts feared after together evaluating one examination report issued by Henderson.

Henderson's description of evidence of abuse was, they said, "completely inconsistent with the photographic evidence."

Out of all of Henderson's findings of abnormalities on the child's body, they said, only one was consistent with child abuse. That mark, however, was also consistent with the child's medical history of chronic constipation with rectal bleeding, they said.

Henderson, they said, had never sought the child's medical history. They said the mistake carried far-reaching consequences.

They wrote: "Misrepresentation of medical examinations in cases of alleged sexual abuse can result in a disturbing range of consequences: altered bodily perceptions by the child and parent, psychological harm to the alleged perpetrator, caregiver separation, false conviction and incarceration of alleged perpetrators, and true convictions which may be overturned on the basis of false evidence."

They closed with a declaration:

"We, the undersigned, believe nurse Henderson's clinical behavior is unacceptable and has possibly resulted in serious, devastating consequences to many individuals in multiple counties in Pennsylvania which relied on her to provide objective medical exams."

Alerting the district attorney

Carrasco sent Daneri a letter on March 4 that requested a meeting. That letter, Daneri said, referenced only general concerns about forensic examinations. Daneri responded March 19.

The March 30 letter signed by the six experts, which clearly spelled out the doctors' concerns, was then hand-delivered by Carrasco to Daneri on April 1 in a meeting in Erie. Mary Ann Daniels, director of the Erie County Office of Children and Youth, was also present.

In response to the letter, Daneri pulled 11 reports Henderson had filed in Erie County criminal cases and sent them to two forensic nursing experts, one in Colorado and the other in Washington, D.C. Those experts found errors or overblown findings in all 11 cases, which triggered Daneri and OCY to announce June 7 that they had begun a review of all cases involving Henderson's work.

Henderson, through her lawyer, has denied doing anything wrong.

The experts who wrote the letter are physicians who practice in the field of child abuse and neglect outside of Erie. They are Carrasco, Cindy Christian, Allan DeJong, Pamela McCarter, Andi Taroli and David Turkewitz. All have medical degrees.

They came together as members of the state Attorney General's Medical/Legal Advisory Board on Child Abuse, but did not write the letter as representatives of that board, Carrasco said.

Seeking justice

Carrasco said she first encountered the troubling Henderson report in her work as director of A Child's Place, in Pittsburgh, which is affiliated with Pittsburgh Mercy Health System and serves as the hub for investigation of child-abuse claims in Allegheny County.

Carrasco has declined to comment on where the case originated. She said she had also reviewed two other cases in which Henderson's reports were not consistent with her photographs.

She said that to confirm her reading of the exam that was the subject of the March 30 letter, she took Henderson's report

to a meeting of the state Attorney General's Medical Legal/Advisory Board on Child Abuse. Carrasco said she asked her five colleagues what they thought.

The Times-News attempted to reach each signer of the letter.

Carrasco and Taroli were the only ones immediately available for comment. Taroli said that "for someone who is specifically trained," the type of problems the letter outlines should not exist.

"I would expect someone who is in this position should have training that should preclude them from making these type of judgments," she said.

Taroli signed the letter as the medical director of the Pegasus Child Advocacy Center in Scranton. She has since started a job as an assistant professor of pediatric forensic medicine at the University of Louisville.

One of the group's concerns centered on the number of findings Henderson listed in the report.

Taroli said she has testified as an expert witness in a few hundred child-abuse cases. In her experience, she said, "a very small percentage" of forensic exams yield physical evidence of sexual abuse of children.

Whenever she testifies for the prosecution, she said, she spends most of her time "educating people" that most forensic exams yield no physical evidence but that lack of evidence is because of a variety of factors and does not mean abuse did not occur.

Carrasco said the six of them agonized over what to do with their assessment of the Henderson report. They knew there might be cases in which, regardless of whether Henderson's reports were accurate or not, guilty people had been convicted. Without the help of evidence from Henderson, those people might go free, she said. There was also the possibility that innocent people had been convicted, she said.

"What was in the interest of justice," she said. "That was the guiding principle."

About two months passed between the time of the April 1 meeting and Daneri's June 7 announcement about the review of Henderson's cases. Carrasco said she and other doctors feared for a time that nothing would be done.

"We are very pleased with how Erie has responded so far," she said.

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