

Woman suffering post-natal depression drowned seven-week-old despite being monitored by social workers

Council failures led to baby's death

David Brindle and Paul Myers

A WOMAN suffering acute post-natal depression drowned her seven-week-old baby while being monitored by social workers, a court heard yesterday. She had a conviction for attempting to kill a previous baby.

The London borough of Lambeth admitted it was responsible for failure to protect the child, Mia Gibelli, through errors of judgment, omissions and delays.

Tim Yeo, the junior health minister responsible for social services, said Lambeth's performance in the case, as in other areas of its child care work, had been lamentable.

"Lambeth have been once again guilty of the grossest degree of incompetence, but it is, I am afraid, part and parcel of their record generally in

relation to child care," the minister said in an LBC radio interview. "It does defy belief that there should have been such a poor level of communication, such a wholly inadequate response, given the nature of the tragedy which was all too likely to occur under these circumstances."

Christine Gibelli, Mia's mother, admitted infanticide in a brief appearance yesterday at the Old Bailey. The Recorder of London, Judge Lawrence Verney, ordered her to remain in the secure unit at Cane Hill hospital in Coulsdon, Surrey.

The judge told Mrs Gibelli, aged 36, of West Norwood, south London: "It is perfectly clear that the balance of your mind was disturbed at the time as a direct result of giving birth to that child. It is an illness that requires treatment, can be treated and responds to treatment."

The court heard that Mrs Gi-

belli drowned Mia by placing her face down in a few inches of water in the kitchen sink, having said she was bathing her.

After about 15 minutes, she screamed to her partner, Kevin Shields, to call the police. Efforts by him and by an ambulance crew to revive the baby proved hopeless.

In 1987, Mrs Gibelli had been placed on probation after admitting attempted infanticide on another daughter, also aged two months, whom she had dropped from an upper-floor window. The daughter and her brother were placed on the at-risk register in Lambeth, but later went to live with their father in Sunderland.

Alun Jones, QC, defending, said: "This is not a case of a lack of care. It is notable for the variety and extent of the care. At every move she was surrounded by a battalion of carers, but they failed to prevent a predictable tragedy."

An inquiry report by Lambeth area child protection committee says the care was blighted by "a series of omissions, oversights, procrastinations and failures to communicate".

A case conference to discuss the family was not scheduled until the day Mia died — a date which may in itself have added to the pressure on Mrs Gibelli.

The report makes 27 recommendations for changes in procedures and practice. Lambeth said it had already enacted the most pressing of these and extra staff had been allocated to child protection work.

Steve Whaley, the borough council's Labour leader, said: "The council accepts the errors made in this case. However, there is no denying that the workload placed upon staff poses great difficulties in their struggle to act in the best interests of the many children in need."



Christine Gibelli... ordered to stay in secure unit for treatment PHOTOGRAPH EDDIE MULHOLLAND

Fatal errors left girl at the mercy of mother in grip of depression

David Brindle on the lack of communication and delays that built atmosphere of confusion

FOUR critical errors left Mia Gibelli unprotected from the sudden attack of homicidal depression which seized her mother as she bathed her on the day that child protection workers were belatedly meeting to discuss her case.

Some workers had known before Mia's birth that her mother, Christine Gibelli, had such a serious post-natal problem that she had a previous conviction for attempted infanticide. But co-ordination was so poor that others, with central roles, were never told.

Error one was made when a pre-birth planning meeting took place on April 29 last year, seven days before Mia was born at King's College hospital. The only agencies in attendance were social services, the police and probation. As a result, community nursing staff who later visited Mrs Gibelli never knew of her history.

At the time, social services

staff were working to procedures which had not been updated in accordance with Working Together, the national child protection guidelines, and did not stipulate that such pre-birth meetings should have the full status of a case conference.

No minutes of the meeting were kept. Police notes show that it was agreed that, should Mrs Gibelli decline to stay with her baby in a supervised unit at the Bethlem-Maudsley psychiatric hospital, "consideration would be given" to legal action to protect the child.

Error two came after Mia was born. Mrs Gibelli had declined an offer of an initial two-week placement in the Bethlem's mother-and-baby unit, where it was proposed she should have oestrogen therapy.

Kevin Shields, Mrs Gibelli's partner but not Mia's father, had encouraged her to agree to alternative progesterone therapy under Dr Katharina Dal-

ton, a Harley Street specialist and a leading authority on post-natal depression. Dr Channi Kumar, at the Bethlem, was unconvinced by this treatment but agreed she could have it at the mother-and-baby unit. Mrs Gibelli still declined.

At this point, five days after the birth and with mother and baby doing well, Mrs Gibelli was discharged home from King's and there was no intervention by social services to seek legal protection.

An inquiry report by the Lambeth area child protection committee says that, with hindsight, an emergency protection order should have been sought to prevent discharge while further plans were made. No such action was taken because of "confusion over management responsibility". However, no legal steps were taken later because, in the view of the social work team leader in the West Norwood area, "the situation between mother and baby was good".

The report says there were "more than sufficient" grounds to seek a care order under the

Children Act at any stage before Mia's death.

Error three was the delay in calling a case conference to review Mia's welfare and consider whether she should have been placed on the at-risk register. The conference was called for the day the baby died.

On May 13, two days after her discharge, Mrs Gibelli told her probation officer she feared her crisis period would come eight weeks after birth. The message was never passed to social services.

Mia died two days short of being eight weeks old.

Social workers who visited the family home on May 19 recommended the calling of a case conference as soon as possible. However, the case was not even allocated to a specific social worker for a further eight days and the conference was delayed for six weeks.

Error four came at the end. Mrs Gibelli had been receiving daily progesterone injections, but had for a period switched to taking the hormone in suppository form. On June 25, she asked Dr Dalton if she could go back to injections. The doctor wrote to Dr Stavros Vastilas, Mrs Gibelli's general practitioner, asking him to effect the change.

Though the GP practice administered injections on June 26 and 27, Mrs Gibelli received no injection on June 28, a Sunday. She killed Mia the next morning.

According to the inquiry report, Mr Shields "understood from the GP that the district nurse was not keen to go in on a Sunday". But a spokesman for King's, which administers the community nursing service, said yesterday the nurse had received a message only to assess Mrs Gibelli on the Monday.

Dr Vastilas's practice, the Croydon family health services authority, responsible for the practice, and the Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham FHS, covering the family home, all yesterday declined to comment on the injection issue.

Loyal partner's 'nightmare'

Madeleine Bunting meets the man who spent four years fighting mother's psychiatric problems

"THE FIRST time I'd seen Christine like a normal person was when she was pregnant," said Kevin Shields, of Christine Gibelli, the woman he lived with for four years.

It was the final proof to him that her psychiatric problems were caused by a hormonal imbalance and that what she needed was not more anti-depressants but hormone replacement therapy. He calls her a "hormonal time bomb."

But, Mr Shields argues, the psychiatrists who treated Mrs Gibelli would not listen to him. His concern now is that she is still not getting the care she needs; he claims she has attempted suicide at least once since Mia's death.

When the couple lived together, Mrs Gibelli was prone to erratic mood swings and deep depressions. Mr Shields says her mother told him the problems started when her daughter began to menstruate at the age of 11.

Horrified by Mrs Gibelli's behaviour and her previous attempted infanticide, Mr Shields, a motorcycle despatch rider, tried to diagnose her problem.

He believed there was a cyclical pattern: every month, he says, another person emerged for 3-4 days. He read up on pre-menstrual syndrome and post-natal depression and found Dr Dalton, the Harley Street specialist in hormone replacement therapy, who agreed to see Mrs Gibelli without being paid and prescribed progesterone.

On the night before Mia's death Mr Shields suspected the baby could be in danger. Mrs Gibelli had a "blank look" which he knew presaged depression. It emerged that she had missed her progesterone injection that day.

Mr Shields is adamant that although Lambeth social services made mistakes, it is not to blame for Mia's death. Mr Shields admits that the

time he has spent with Mrs Gibelli, a former legal secretary, has been a "nightmare". But he says: "Nobody has ever stuck by her. If I didn't stick by her, I'd be part of the problem. Masochistic as I may be, I will not give up on her."

John Illman writes: Between 10 and 20 per cent of women are estimated to be seriously affected by the premenstrual syndrome, which is defined as "a group of physical and mental changes which begin anything between two and 14 days after menstruation, and which are relieved almost immediately the period starts."

One of the most common is mood change which may trigger extreme irritability and anger. The syndrome is still thought of as newly recognised. Its link with post-natal depression is not widely known.

Two earlier deaths drew criticism

LAMBETH, which has the country's heaviest child protection workload, has been criticised for its role in two previous deaths, writes David Brindle.

In 1984, 22-month-old Tyra Henry was battered to death by her father while on Lambeth's at-risk register. In 1987, 16-month-old Doreen Mason (right) was killed by her parents after being on the register before the family moved to the neighbouring borough of Southwark.

The Labour-controlled borough has been a frequent target of government ministers for having cases of at-risk children unallocated to social workers. Latest figures show 73 such cases, out of 686 on the register, compared to 132 out of 974 at the end of 1991.

The borough's £83 million social services budget for 1992-93 is overspent by £3 million. The authority as a whole faces £23 million cuts in 1993-94.

