

**BFMS News Sheet Spring 2021**

Dear Reader,

We remain busy. In the last week, the society has been contacted by two callers to the helpline in what would appear to be 'textbook' false-memory type cases involving troubled individuals accusing family members. It seems likely that the fragile mental health of these vulnerable people is exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. By any comparison, a number of recent cases contain extreme allegations which, like a storm cloud, are tearing families apart. As a number of you have recently pinpointed in personal conversations, these allegations result in many victims including, of course, the accusers - many of whom remain isolated and estranged from their families. Not all cases involve family members (although the majority certainly do). We have two unrelated cases listed for trial later in the year and, in one of these cases, the accuser and the accused are not related.

It is not all doom and gloom, however. I do have some good news to share. On Christmas Eve 2020, police contacted a long-standing BFMS member, who had been subjected to police interview under caution, to say that the case was being discontinued (no further action). The timing of this news was particularly welcome prior to the Christmas festivities (I use that term advisedly in Lockdown). Police have recently discontinued another case involving a new member to the BFMS. In another development, two cases known to the BFMS have been referred to the full Criminal Court of Appeal. A date for your diary: as you will recall, last year's **AGM and annual conference** was cancelled due to the pandemic. We are however determined to go ahead this year with a virtual event (probably using Zoom) on **Friday 30 April**. The full programme will be disseminated shortly.

Tidying up my paperwork recently, I came across the following letter – which I thought it pertinent to share with you. It is addressed to the Director of the BFMS.

*My dear Madeline,*

*We all love a happy ending, BFMS members more than most. Well here's one.*

*It's a long time since we were in touch, Madeline, so I'll remind you that I had two daughters who many years ago made (unspecified) allegations against me. They both broke off contact.*

*Over time their attitude changed. They stopped being preoccupied with the past, got back in touch and became what you call 'returners'. I have a close and loving relationship with both of them - despite them living in Birmingham and Derbyshire (locations have been changed).*

*Last week I went to visit the younger one in Birmingham. Apropos of nothing at all she took my hand and said, "Dad, I want to ask you to forgive me." She went on to tell me - for the first time - how sorry she was about excluding us from her life all those years ago, and how she had come to understand that the therapy process had misled her. She realised now that her "memories" were not genuine. And we talked at length about how these things happen. I leave you to imagine what this has meant to me and H.*

*So we have at any rate one 'retractor' in the family. I wanted to share this experience with you and your members because I know how much they need to hear stories that allow them to hope.*

*Best wishes,*

*Michael (identities have been changed).*

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I am currently speaking with a retractor. I am not easily shocked, but the story of this brave women did shock me. She has kindly offered to speak at our April conference.

In 2017, Dr Julia Shaw, Maria-Bianca Leonte and Georgina Ball visited the office and stayed over to analyse a sample of cases in the archive. Together we wrote an (as yet unpublished) study entitled, *When is the issue of false memory raised in historical child sexual abuse allegations? An archival study of 496 British cases*. The abstract is printed below. If you are interested to read the 28-page paper, we can either e-mail you a copy or a hard copy can be sent on request (to [Madeline, madeline@bfms.org.uk](mailto:Madeline.madeline@bfms.org.uk)).

Dr Kevin Felstead

### **Abstract**

This study demonstrates that false memory, particularly of historical child sexual abuse, is a significant issue in the English criminal justice system. This is the first study to systematically analyse a large database of cases from the UK in which the issue of false memory was raised. We examined a random sample of 496 cases from an archive of 20 years' worth of cases collected by the British False Memory Society (BFMS). The BFMS is a charity that provides support to those who claim they have been falsely accused of a crime on the basis of a false memory, dealing mostly with claims related to historical child sexual abuse. The results of this study show that the issue of false memory is raised often in the UK, with thousands of known cases. In our sample, the issue was raised most often in cases where the person said to have a false memory was a woman in her thirties who had attended psychological therapy and was accusing her now elderly father of historical child sexual abuse. Occupation of both the accuser and accused was varied, suggesting that the issue of false memory can become relevant to people from diverse occupations. We highlight the need for understanding as to the role of false memories in the criminal justice system and stress the need to change the false dichotomy of allegations being seen as either the truth or lies to one that acknowledges false memories as a reasonable third option.

On the subject of research, I recently co-authored a paper with Professor Christopher French, entitled: *Dr James Ost's contributions to the work of the British False Memory Society*. The peer-reviewed article was published in the journal of *Memory* (Routledge, Taylor@ Francis Group). The abstract is published below, and a copy of the article is available on request.

### **Abstract**

The British False Memory Society is a registered charity founded in 1993 in response to an epidemic of false claims of past childhood sexual abuse by adults in therapy. The accusers believe they have recovered unconscious memories of a hidden past, but scientific evidence suggests that the claims are in all probability based upon false memories. The BFMS aims to raise awareness about false memory and to reduce the impact of the resulting false accusations. Dr James Ost was an active member of the BFMS's Scientific and Professional Advisory Board. Three lines of his research were particularly relevant to the work of the BFMS. The first of these was his investigations of retractors. His insights provided a deeper understanding of the processes involved in the formation and subsequent rejection of false memories and beliefs relating to such allegations. He was also a gifted experimentalist, one of many whose studies provided empirical proof that false memories can be implanted under well controlled experimental conditions. Finally, he carried out and produced reviews of surveys of misconceptions about the nature of memory, thus highlighting issues that have major implications for the working of the legal system. Dr Ost also served as an expert defence witness on a number of occasions.

The all-party parliamentary group on miscarriages of justice have recently published a detailed re-

port entitled: *In the Interest of Justice: An inquiry into the Criminal Cases Review Commission*. The BFMS are cited in this significant publication. Let us know if you would like to receive a copy. UK universities are largely operating virtually online. I delivered my first talk (using Zoom) since Lockdown to the University of Portsmouth's department of psychology on the 12<sup>th</sup> March. That was an exciting day and it felt like a step in the right direction. I do miss meeting people face-to-face and networking to raise awareness of the BFMS.

Warm wishes to each of you.

Dr Kevin Felstead  
March 2021

## **Overseas False Memory Societies**

**Please feel free to write or phone if you have relatives in these countries who would like to**

### **AUSTRALIA**

Australian False Memory Association Inc., AFMA, PO Box  
74, Campbelltown, South Australia 5074, Australia  
Tel: 00 61 300 88 88 77 Email: [false.memory@bigpond.com](mailto:false.memory@bigpond.com)  
[www.afma.asn.au](http://www.afma.asn.au)

### **CANADA**

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Email: [adriaanjwmak@rogers.com](mailto:adriaanjwmak@rogers.com)

### **FRANCE**

Alerte Faux Souvenirs Induits, Maison des Associations, 11  
rue Caillaux, 75013 Paris, France  
Tel: 00 33 6 81 67 10 55 Email:  
[afsi.fauxsouvenirs@wanadoo.fr](mailto:afsi.fauxsouvenirs@wanadoo.fr) [www.psyfmfrance.fr](http://www.psyfmfrance.fr)

### **GERMANY**

Schulterschluss bei Sektenbetroffenheit e.V.  
Email: [kontakt@schulterschluss.info](mailto:kontakt@schulterschluss.info).  
[www.schulterschluss.info](http://www.schulterschluss.info)

### **NETHERLANDS**

Email: [info@werkgroepwfh.nl](mailto:info@werkgroepwfh.nl)  
[www.werkgroepwfh.nl](http://www.werkgroepwfh.nl)

### **NEW ZEALAND**

Casualties of False Sexual Allegations (COSAs)  
New Zealand  
<http://menz.org.nz/cosa/>

### **NORDIC COUNTRIES**

Cke Möller – Fax: 00 46 431 21096  
Email: [jim351d@tinet.se](mailto:jim351d@tinet.se)

The Scientific and Professional Advisory Board provides BFMS with guidance and advice concerning future scientific, legal and professional enquiry into all aspects of false accusations of abuse. Whilst the members of the board support the purposes of BFMS as set out in its brochure, the views expressed in this newsletter might not necessarily be held by some or all of the board members. Equally, BFMS may not always agree with the views expressed by members of the board.

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**Dr H Cameron** - Consultant Child Psychiatrist (Retired).

**Professor M Conway** - Director, Centre for Memory and Law, City University, London.

**Dr Mairi Fleming** - Psychologist, Glasgow Caledonian University.

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**Professor Fiona Gabbert** - Professor of Psychology & Director of Goldsmiths' Forensic Psychology, Goldsmiths, University of London.

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**Professor G Oxburgh** - Professor of Police Science and Head of Policing Studies, Northumbria University.

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**Dr B Tully** - Community Psychologist, Humanist Celebrant and Pastoral Support Worker, London.

**Dr Kimberley Wade** - Reader in Psychology, University of Warwick.

**Professor D B Wright** - Professor of Psychology, Florida International University.

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