

# THE BackPages

## Viewpoint

### Contents

544

ESSAY

**The consultation and physical examination**

Alexandra L Connan

546

ESSAY

**Patient care — crunch time**

David G Connell

547

**'Just a furious, helpless roar'**

Mike Fitzpatrick

548

ESSAY

**Insecurity and risk in the consultation**

Jeff Clark

550

ESSAY

**Isolation and insight: practical pillars of revalidation?**

Stephen J Cox and John D Holden

551

VIEWPOINT

**Reflections in a cracked mirror**

Chris Heath

552

DIGEST

**Nice one Arthur**

Roger Jones

553

SERIAL

**Facing unpalatable truths**

Jane Roberts

554

Doom?

Saul Miller

### NO PLACE FOR CHILDREN

Every year around 2000 children are imprisoned by private security companies acting on behalf of the UK Borders Agency. A recent report by the Children's Commissioner for England, Professor Sir Al Aynsley-Green, describes what happens to them.<sup>1</sup> Its findings are shocking. The children involved range from newborns to teenagers. Many have been born in Britain. The authorities can take years to process asylum claims, so children may have lived and attended schools here for up to a decade before being arrested for deportation. Some families are imprisoned before their appeals have been fully reviewed. As Professor Aynsley-Green makes clear, detention is 'not reserved as a genuine last resort as required by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.'<sup>1</sup>

The Commissioner and his team visited Yarl's Wood in Bedfordshire, the largest detention centre. They talked to children and parents about their arrest and removal.

Families described how security officers arrived at the crack of dawn. After hammering at the door, up to 10 or even 20 officers burst in. Parents and children were given only minutes to pack. They were forced to leave behind pets, toys, documents, jewellery, mementos, medicines, and in some cases mobile phones with all their contact numbers. Families talked of officers being aggressive, rude, and sometimes violent. Some parents were mocked or humiliated. Some of the children were not allowed to eat, or drink, or go to the toilet. 'Why did they have to search my sister?' asked one child. 'She is only five'.

In the prison vans, both adults and children are put in cages. Some children are conveyed in separate vans from their parents. Many children described how the cages stank of urine and vomit. Officers swore and laughed at them. Sometimes the vans stopped at service stations, but only the officers got out. Meanwhile, children had 'accidents' in their pants.

At Yarl's Wood, the children find they are in a prison. The Commissioner describes it as 'bleak and grey'. There are regular roll-calls. The food is awful, with rice that is 'undercooked, dry, tasteless and responsible for causing children to get tummy ache.' Schooling exists, but it is 'uncomfortable and unnatural'. Play facilities are sparse. The children may stay at Yarl's Wood for a few days, months, or over a year. They live in constant fear of return to countries they may

never have known, and where their parents may have been persecuted, tortured, or raped.

Some of the Commissioner's most critical words are reserved for the medical care at Yarl's Wood. When his team visited, they found no evidence of audit, clinical guidelines for children, incident recording, or any proper mental health assessment. There was no record of children having BCG or any immunisation against measles or meningococcal disease — even though many have HIV positive mothers or face deportation to places where TB and other infections are rife. Malaria prophylaxis was incorrect in some cases and absent in others. No vitamin supplements had been given to pregnant women. Milk formula was rationed and bottle feeding equipment unhygienic. Case reports include a brother and sister with sickle cell disease who became seriously ill after their antibiotics were stopped. Another child had a central venous line that was only discovered when he was admitted to hospital. The report refers to the case of a breast-fed infant who was detained for 4 months and released suffering from both anaemia and rickets. The Commissioner's judgement is that clinical governance is 'unacceptably poor'.

The report calls for the detention of children for immigration purposes to end. We must all support that call. The Royal Colleges and BMA need to state that the detention of children is unacceptable. There is a '*prima facie*' case for Bedfordshire PCT, the GMC and the Commission for Health and Social Care to investigate care at Yarl's Wood. Doctors should lobby their MPs, support Medical Justice, and make representations on behalf of detainees named by the National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns.<sup>2</sup> Whatever your views on immigration, please read the report or Professor Aynsley-Green's personal testimony<sup>3</sup> and respond to his call for the public to express outrage.

John Launer

### REFERENCES

1. Sir Aynsley-Green A. *The arrest and detention of children subject to immigration control: a report following the Children's Commissioner for England's visit to the Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre*. London: 11 Million, 2009. <http://www.11million.org.uk/resource/di550e08psxhlc9f3mmrlqwd.pdf> (accessed 15 Jun 2009).
2. National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns. <http://www.ncadc.org.uk/>. Birmingham: NCADC.
3. Sir Aynsley-Green A. *No place for children*. <http://www.newstatesman.com/law-and-reform/2008/09/children-detention-immigration> (accessed 15 Jun 2009).

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