

ALL THE LITTLE LIGHTS

*Guildhall School of Music and Drama
London, 4 January 2019*

CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION LAID BARE

'Art helps you see'¹ and we can all probably think of an example of a film, book, or even TV soap influencing our thinking on challenging topics. Those of us who watched telly in the 1980s will remember the brutality of unemployment and poverty in *Boys from the Blackstuff*. More recently, Helen's story of being the victim of intimate partner violence and coercive abuse from the terrifying Rob in *The Archers* has certainly made sure screening questions about violence at home are more prevalent in my consultations. The reach of these programmes should not be underestimated, nor the potential impact they can have.

Recently, I visited the Guildhall School of Music and Drama to watch a powerful and brave student-produced performance of *All the Little Lights*, written by Jane Upton in 2015. It tells of three teenage girls who meet to try to celebrate one of their birthdays. What would normally be thought of as a joyous event soon demonstrates that these vulnerable young people have had their childhoods taken away from them by child sexual exploitation (CSE). Their norms and expectations have been recalibrated through grooming, and their lives are no longer their own. At one point Joanne explains that she plucked up courage to approach the authorities, but was met with, 'there are thirteen year old girls and there are thirteen year old girls, if you get what I mean'. From that moment she became ever-more caught up in a web of control and dependency. Upton wrote this fictional tale inspired by the truth, much based upon the reality of the Rochdale tragedies of the systematic and organised rape and sexual abuse of vulnerable young girls. Sadly there have been similar cases in the East Midlands, Huddersfield, and Rotherham — in fact probably most regions in the country.

Upton met up with the Derby-based charity Safe and Sound,² who work with victims of CSE. The play was first staged in Nottingham and a run in the West End followed. The three inspirational young actors who delivered such a heartfelt performance in the new year left me an emotional wreck, fired up with indignation

and injustice. As a GP I am all too aware of the consequences of CSE and feel frustrated that all I can do is try to treat some of the horrific symptoms the victims display and raise awareness.³ Also, some of our patients may benefit from the current listening exercise offered by the Independent Inquiry into CSE.⁴

In an ideal world we would eradicate CSE, but, although we can comment on and advocate for this, it is probably beyond the scope of most of us jobbing GPs. However, what we *can* offer is our compassion and careful listening to our most vulnerable patients; early intervention goes a long way to improving the lives of victims. The fantastic work done by charities such as Safe and Sound is doing exactly that, and the arts are playing their part too. If we can raise awareness using the power of art then we stand a chance to change attitudes where it matters, to fund mental health and bespoke services properly, so that vulnerable young people can be supported to recover or at least move their lives forward from their abuse.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp19X701609>

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