

Experts call for child abuse booklet to be withdrawn

'Misleading advice' concerns psychiatrists

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CHILD abuse experts fear publication of "misleading" advice by the Scottish Executive could spark a wave of false memory allegations.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland has called for the withdrawal of a booklet advising social workers on how to deal with victims of child sex abuse. It has deemed the advice dangerous, while psychologists are concerned that untrained staff are being encouraged to tackle such a difficult and sensitive issue.

The document, *A Can of Worms - Yes You Can! Working with Survivors of Sexual Abuse*, is part of a £2m strategy aimed at "breaking the myth" that the subject should only be dealt with by highly trained specialists. It has been distributed to staff and volunteers working in social and health care.

Dr Chris Freeman, of the RCPS, said he was very surprised the executive had failed to obtain any psychiatric advice or approval for the booklet which, he said, goes too far in linking sexual abuse with psychiatric problems.

He said: "It implies that if you have an adult with a psychiatric problem you should be routinely asking them questions about sexual abuse."

Dr Freeman said he was unhappy about the document's references to the controversial

concepts of recovered memory and false memory.

"You shouldn't go searching for a history of abuse, as people are always looking for meaning behind things. Every reasonable psychiatrist would keep an open mind when dealing with psychiatric disorders."

Calling for the booklet to be withdrawn, he said the college would be willing to help produce alternative guidance.

Can of Worms suggests that routine exploration of a histo-

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ry of sexual abuse should be considered a priority when dealing with adults suffering problems as diverse as acute psychiatric illness, serious and persistent offending, and homelessness.

It goes on to list 13 more subtle signs of abuse including the way they hold their bodies, difficulty sleeping and cleaning their houses repeatedly. It claims that this behaviour may be a result of other contributory factors.

Experts claim it fails to stress strongly enough that such symptoms could be due to any number of other causes.

The British False Memory Society, which challenges the belief that so-called repressed memory of childhood sexual abuse was common, has written to the executive asking for the booklet to be withdrawn.

Madeline Greenhalgh, the society's director, said: "It is dabbling in a very dangerous area. We are talking about vulnerable people who have mental health problems, who are often looking for answers. If all the workers - and there must be thousands - who receive this booklet referred to it, the potential damage could be enormous."

She added: "Recovered memory is a potential minefield, even for the most highly qualified and experienced of mental health professionals. The risk of inducing symptoms in a patient as a result of a counsellor's wrong words is considerable."

A spokeswoman for the executive, however, said: "This has been written from a practical perspective and informed by the personal experiences of adult survivors. Ultimately, we want to increase public awareness of childhood sexual abuse so people will feel more comfortable disclosing abuse at an earlier stage. If people can access services and support earlier, this will aid their recovery and reduce their risk of physical and mental illness and suicidal behaviour."