The Southall affair

Children are abused—both overtly and covertly. Paediatricians must be able to investigate allegations of child abuse in an atmosphere in which they are afforded some protection from being wrong. They will make mistakes—and these errors will have tragic consequences for all involved—particularly the families. Unfortunately, uncertainty is common in the field of child abuse.

I have watched from afar, and had numerous conversations during my frequent trips to London with my UK colleagues about the General Medical Council (GMC) and Professor David Southall. As you are aware in early December 2007, the GMC ruled that Professor Southall can no longer practice medicine—he was erased from the medical register. I find it difficult to reconcile this decision with Professor Southall’s preeminent international standing in the field of child protection. His seminal paper, involving covert video surveillance in the field of child abuse, has tragic consequences for all involved—particularly the families. Unfortunately, uncertainty is common in the field of child abuse.

And what of the future for paediatricians who work in child protection? The College has produced training courses at various levels in child protection, and I suspect will move toward some type of licensure for paediatricians who work in this field. The College continues to play an active role with numerous groups to create a system that allows for investigation, mistakes and reconciliation. It is critical that paediatricians maintain a standard of conduct in these cases that is beyond reproach. Careful, complete and retention of all relevant documents is important. Harvey Marcovitch, in a recent editorial, outlined what the courts normally expect of expert witnesses. However, it will be years before these issues are sorted out, and I fear that in the near future, some might be reluctant to embark on thorough investigation of suspected cases of abuse. But sadly, as we all know, children are abused, and we must remain vigilant in the protection of children.

References