

# A mother's diary records the awful death of a child 'in care'

**I**t is four years since I began regularly reporting here on the most disturbing story I have covered in all my decades as a journalist – the way our “child protection” system has been allowed, by the secrecy imposed by the courts on all its workings, to go so horrifically off the rails. Last week, Lord Justice Munby, recently promoted to be head of our family courts, announced yet again his determination to meet the tidal wave of criticism now being directed at this system from all sides. But he is aware that opening up the courts themselves to “the glare of publicity” can only be part of an ongoing process. The system has now become so riddled with abuses at every level that to bring it back to the noble ideals it was set up to serve would require a titanic effort of reform, taking years.

Among the more obvious failings of the system are the human and professional inadequacy of too many social workers, and the miserable plight of so many of those record numbers of children they are now taking into “care”. This week, I describe the fate of one such child, as harrowing as any of the hundreds of cases I have followed over the years. I have only been able to grasp something of the full horror of this story thanks to a meticulous day-to-day diary kept by the mother, factually recording all that has been done to her family since it was blown apart as cruelly as if it had been hit by a bomb.

At this time last year, this was a happy, normal family, including four-year-old Jonas, who had Down's syndrome, and was much loved and cared for by all the family. His parents had become expert in all aspects of looking after a Down's child, including the care needed over sleep apnoea, a potentially life-threatening breathing problem that can need instant attention, which was why Jonas slept every night in his parents' room.

In April, for factors I cannot report for legal reasons, and which were unconnected in any way with Jonas, the boy was removed from his family by Somerset county council social workers, even though he was still recovering from an operation. They placed him alone, miles away, with two recently recruited



Jonas 'visibly regressed' and eventually died after he was handed over to foster carers

foster carers who, it turned out, had no experience of Down's syndrome. Because of his “special needs”, the carers received the going rate of £900 a week for looking after the boy, plus a monthly allowance of £560, much of it free from tax.

When the parents were allowed “contact sessions” with their son, they soon became concerned at how he was being looked after. They observed that his toilet and other medical needs were not being properly met. They were worried by how he arrived and left in a car with an Alsatian dog all over him on the back seat.

Through the summer, as the mother's diary shows, their concerns mounted. They felt that their son was not being properly medicated for sores and sunburn. He showed small bruises. In August, they were not surprised when Somerset's child-protection services were given an excoriatory report by Ofsted, which failed the department on

all counts (nearly 40 per cent of their “child protection plans” were deemed “inadequate”, the lowest possible rating).

By October, the parents were so disturbed by the way their son was “visibly regressing”, both physically and mentally, that they applied – in vain – to a judge for the boy to be removed from his foster home. More serious ailments appeared, including a severe burn mark (dismissed by the carers as “just a bruise”).

His mother arranged a dental appointment for a severely infected tooth, which she discovered was never kept. He was also “red and blue”, with obvious breathing problems. As the weather turned colder, he was brought to contacts with no proper protective clothing. He was being left to sleep alone in his own room, unmonitored, from 5.30 in the evening until 7.00 the next morning.

By November, serious alarm bells were ringing. Jonas looked terrible, with bad

conjunctivitis, and discharges from his eyes and ears. On Wednesday November 20, he was clearly so ill that the contact supervisor agreed with the father that he must see a doctor urgently, and said she had told the carers. The following day he was "too ill for contact". The boy was never taken to the doctor.

On Sunday November 24, having heard nothing, the parents - who had not been given the carers' number - rang another foster carer, who clearly knew that something terrible had happened but wouldn't say what. He would only give them a confidential emergency number for social services. The parents were told they would receive a call, but were never rung back. Soon afterwards, four police arrived at the door to tell them their son was dead. He had apparently collapsed. An air ambulance had been summoned to fly him to the hospital where he had been treated before, but it was too late.

The social workers made no attempt to inform the now-grief-stricken parents of what had happened, although it emerged that they had sent a doctor to "comfort" the foster carers.

I was so struck by the calmly factual way in which the mother had kept her diary throughout these horrendous months that, last week, I made sure that a copy was given to the coroner. Even if Jonas's death is found to have been from "natural causes", which might normally rule out the need for an inquest, I thought it was important for the coroner to know something of the background that had led up to it.

Such are the barest outlines of a story that gives us yet another glimpse of how tragically dysfunctional too much of our "child protection" system has become. In a way, it provides a telling contrast to the fate of "Baby P". In this case, the charge against social services was not that they failed to intervene when there was every reason for doing so, but the opposite: that, having first removed a well looked-after child, for what seems to be no very obvious reason, they then placed him in the "care" of people who appeared not to be fit to look after him properly. This raises very serious questions that must now be answered.