

## THE DEATH OF ISABEL SCHWARZ

**A suitable case for an inquiry? Frontline social workers are often exposed to physical dangers. But murder raises more serious questions about care in the community.**

On 6 July 1984, a young social worker called Isabel Schwarz was savagely knifed to death in her office at Bexley psychiatric hospital.

Within two days, Sharon Campbell- a former client of Isabel- was arrested and charged with the murder. When she was brought to trial on 28 January 1985, Campbell was judged unfit to plead. She has been in Broadmoor ever since.

The alleged killer had been an inpatient at Bexley psychiatric hospital when Isabel Schwarz began work there in September 1982. Schwarz's job, as a psychiatric social worker, was her first professional post since qualifying that summer at the university of Kent. Her employers at the hospital were Bexley borough council, who ran its social work department. The hospital as a whole is run by Bexley district health authority.

Schwarz had only been Campbell's psychiatric social worker for 2 months when, in November 1982, Campbell was discharged from Bexley hospital. She then went to live at Honor Lea hostel. Schwarz remained her social worker till October 1983, with the approval of her superiors. This was somewhat unusual, and indicated that the two young women had struck up a close rapport which Isabel's employers felt was beneficial for the client.

The psychiatric consultant, Douglas Brough, had overall responsibility for Campbell's mental health from 1982 till the murder. Employed by the SE Thames regional health authority, Brough had treated Campbell when she was an inpatient at Bexley. Now that she was at Honor Lea, he would see her intermittently in his outpatient clinic at Lewisham hospital.

Much later, on 23 July 1985, Dr Brough wrote to Andrew Andrews, legal advisor to the SE Thames regional health authority: "Re: Isabel Schwarz (deceased) / Sharon Campbell." In this report, Dr Brough says Campbell's behaviour became "disturbed and disruptive" while she was at Honor Lea, and she was therefore seen by Brough's staff on the crisis intervention team on 5 July 1983. Brough also saw her himself that day.

Though Brough's report does not say so directly, it now seems no psychiatrist saw Campbell again before the murder, which took place a year and a day later. Andrews says Campbell's psychiatric case notes record that other appointments were made for her after 5 July but she did not keep them. The case notes close on 19 August 1983, when Campbell failed to turn up for her fourth appointment since 5 July. "No longer at Honor Lea. Whereabouts unknown." Campbell had run away. Andrews says the regional health authority is unaware of any psychiatrist from anywhere else seeing her after that date.

The officer from Kent police in charge of the murder case says that Campbell went to stay with her mother but had to leave because of what she describes as “unreasonable” behaviour. Campbell then went to live at the Homeless family Unit in Lewisham High Street. On 5 October 1983, Isabel Schwarz- still her social worker and still seeing her once a fortnight or so, even while Lewisham hospital had declared her whereabouts unknown- tried to help Campbell with her housing problem. Unaccompanied, she set out with her client to visit Denbridge House, a home run by the Richmond Fellowship. On the way, Campbell allegedly attacked Schwarz as she drove....

Campbell managed to stop the car at a garage and call the police. The police then accompanied Schwarz and Campbell to Denbridge house. Isabel did not press charges.

Schwarz then told Brough about the assault. In his report on the case, Brough writes: “I regret now I did not take steps to reassess personally the mental state of the patient after the attack on Isabel in the car.” Isabel also told her superiors about the attack and was told to hand over the case. On 21 October 1983, she wrote to Lewisham social services asking them to take on Sharon Campbell. In mid-November, Lewisham’s Steve Kirk became Campbell’s social worker.

In his report, Dr Brough also says he regrets not taking a “personal initiative” in contacting Kirk. Brough has since had such a severe nervous breakdown that he has been hospitalised himself and has retired from the NHS. Approached by me about the case, he declined to comment.

During their nine-month involvement with her, at least two officers from Lewisham council had sporadic contact with Campbell. This was during the very time period when Dr Brough and his psychiatric staff at Lewisham hospital seem to have had no idea where she was, let alone how she was.

Later that winter, several phone calls were made to Isabel’s office, threatening her with death.... The police say four of the secretarial staff knew of the calls...

In the same entry, 8 March 1984, of the case notes in which she recorded the three calls, Schwarz also wrote that she phoned Lewisham social services. But Campbell’s social worker, Steve Kirk, was out. She explained the situation to the duty officer of the day. A few days later, she phoned again and spoke to Kirk directly. He said he was in intermittent contact with Campbell and feared she might be deteriorating. In her case notes at this point, Schwarz does not specifically say she told the Lewisham officials about the threats. But it would be surprising if she didn’t, as they were the reasons he was calling in the first place.

Steve Kirk’s last meeting with Sharon Campbell appears to have been on 16 May... Campbell saw a Lewisham housing welfare officer, John Gingell, on 5 June. He noted down that it was impossible to talk with her. She came out with an incoherent monologue about Schwarz, claiming Schwarz hit her, bullied her and tried to control her life. Campbell was deaf to Gingell’s reminders that Schwarz was no longer her social worker. ... He felt Campbell was likely to deteriorate further and contacted

Steve Kirk. Kirk in turn made an appointment to see Campbell on 7 June, but she never turned up. A month later, Schwarz was dead.

Questions arise as to whether Lewisham council informed the social work department at Bexley hospital of these developments and whether there was any liaison with psychiatric staff at Lewisham hospital. I have sought to put both questions to Lewisham council but they decline to answer and will not let me approach the individuals concerned.

The police believe the killing was premeditated- and so skilfully executed that it was unpreventable. This presupposes that the killer was at liberty to carry it out. Section three of the Mental Health Act, 1983, obliges social services and health authorities to detain clients for psychiatric treatment if “it is necessary for the health or safety of the patient or for the protection of other persons”.....

Bexley council delayed any inquiry into the events surrounding the murder until after the criminal proceedings had drawn to a close the following January. They then held an internal, confidential inquiry. The evidence presented has never been published. Members of staff are not allowed to discuss the case publicly. The director of housing and social services, John Srivalsan, speaks on their behalf.

Before the inquiry began, Srivalsan held a meeting with some half a dozen of Isabel’s former colleagues at the hospital. John Cooley, who had taken up his post as social worker at the same time as Isabel, says he spoke at this meeting and put it to Srivalsan that there should be an independent inquiry into what had happened.

“Several other staff members”, Coley says, “made the same request. But the discussion got no further on this point”.....