

Article on Eddie Hernon

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By Hermann Kelly (then editor of Irish Catholic).

In the concluding part of a series about victims of abuse allegations, Eddie Hernon talks about his fight to restore his good name after being wrongly accused of abusing his own daughter by discredited doctor Moira Woods. Now exonerated, he tells Hermann Kelly about his long personal struggle.

"From the time I was first accused of abuse I wanted to shout from the rooftops, 'I am an innocent man, falsely accused.' This was the initial reaction of Eddie Hernon after he was accused of molesting his daughter in 1985.

Eddie is a small wiry man with clear penetrating blue eyes who looks at you straight and speaks with clear definite purpose. That purpose is to prove that he is a good father who never hurt or sexually abused his own child. He had to do this against the word of now discredited medical doctor, Moira Woods.

A sixty-four-year-old builder's labourer, Eddie left school at 13 years of age, after attending North Brunswick St CBS, Dublin . He worked on building sites all his life, got married at 24 and they had five children.

During the 1980s he split up from his wife and took up with another woman, Bernadette with whom he had a child, a girl named Cherie.

When they came to visit him during Christmas 1985 in London where he was working at the time, the mother noticed blood on the girl's pants and took her to a doctor in London who recorded that the girl had a small graze, "probably the result of the child's own manipulation." He noted "the mother does not feel that there is any possibility of sexual abuse." Eddie became agitated when rumours were started by Bernadette's cousin in London that he had molested the child. A few weeks later, Bernadette took the four year-old to a consultant gynaecologist in the Adelaide hospital, Dublin , Dr Bowman, who wrote: "I have assured Cherie's mum that everything is in order. I could detect no evidence of trauma."

Bernadette was then advised to take Cherie to Dr Moira Woods, then head of the Rotunda Hospital Sexual Assault Treatment Unit (SATU) for confirmation that nothing untoward had taken place. This is where Eddie's personal hell on earth began.

Even though two doctors, one in England and one in Ireland previously confirmed that no abuse had taken place, Moira Woods diagnosed abuse.

She saw hundreds of children in her time in the Rotunda, 600 children in 1987 alone. Eddie Hernon's daughter Cherie was one of three groups of children who the Medical Council had found that Woods wrongly claimed to have been abused. According to Woods herself, there were no physical signs of abuse, and not even a verbal complaint by the girl, but Woods alleged that abuse had taken place. Her interpretation of the way the girl played with dolls was cited as a reason for her concern during the medical assessment. Woods claimed she had the evidence on video. It later emerged, during the Medical Council enquiry, these tapes were destroyed.

What then transpired would have killed many another man and indeed, fueled by distress, Eddie twice attempted suicide.

As a result of Moira Woods' report which accused him of sexually molesting his own child, Eddie lost access to his daughter for three and a half years. At one point he could only meet her when a group of people observed them together from behind a double-sided mirror. "You have absolutely no idea what this was like," he said.

The report of Dr Woods was accepted, and acted on by Dr Fred Lowe, a senior clinical psychologist from the EHB.

When Eddie tried to bring the case to the attention of the Gardai and the courts, the EHB is alleged to have told Cherie's mother that they would take the child into care if she sought to have medical records released to the courts.

In 1989, Harry Colley on behalf of the EHB acknowledged in writing that "there is not and never was sufficient evidence to warrant a fit person order" in relation to the case. The EHB withdrew from the case and Eddie got unrestricted access to his child again. However, this was not enough for Mr Herson.

After many years of struggle he lodged a formal complaint against Dr Moira Woods to the Medical Council in 1992. Although delayed for years by legal obstructions, in January 2002 the Medical Council found Dr Moira Woods guilty of professional misconduct in relation to the diagnosis of sexual abuse of 11 children during the 1980s. She failed to apply necessary standards of judgement and competence, and acted in a manner derogatory to the reputation of the medical profession, it said.

In many ways, this was a vindication for Eddie Herson.

Since the allegations arose, Eddie has proclaimed his innocence to all who would listen. As he said himself, "I just kept plugging away. No-one ever thought that I would get Moira Woods for professional misconduct, but I did."

Asked about the case's effect on his life, Eddie said: "You have no idea what it was like. It has destroyed the last 17 and a half years of my life. At times it has been a living hell."

For all this distress, he has never once received a public statement of apology from Dr Moira Woods for the allegations that were made against him.

Moira Woods is believed to have sold her extensive property holdings in Ireland, including a house in Ailesbury Road and moved to Tuscany where she currently runs a Bed and Breakfast.

Asked how such a deplorable scenario could come about, and why such an exceedingly high rate of child abuse was reported from the Rotunda SATU, Mr Herson puts the blame firmly on the shoulders of what he calls "the small clique of radical feminist ideologues who wish to paint all men as potential child abusers and rapists. Their attack is on the biological father and the family."

Moira Woods' involvement in this story is central. The Government was made aware that there was a problem with exaggerated reports of child sexual abuse in April 1987 during which time Dr Woods was in charge of the unit. Joe Robins, a civil servant in the Dept of Health wrote in a memo at the time to the Department secretary: "There have been far too many exaggerated comments and statistics put out by persons such as Moira Woods, Ann O'Donnell and Clodagh Corcoran who are turning child sexual abuse, in particular, into an industry."

Incidentally, these three people, author, Clodagh Corcoran, Ann O'Donnell, then director of the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, and Moira Woods; along with Fred Lowe and others were members of a working group set up by the Irish Council for Civil Liberties with government funding in 1984 to make recommendations about policy and law on child sexual abuse.

By June 1987, the government proposed to close down the Rotunda Hospital Sexual Assault Treatment Unit. This they quickly did with the stipulation that none of the staff previously employed in the Rotunda SATU were allowed to take up posts in the new purpose built child treatment units in the St Louis and St Clare clinics.

Woods' medical career however, was not ended by the closing of the Rotunda SATU. She went on to become clinical director of CARI (Children at Risk in Ireland).

Dr Fred Lowe went on to be the clinical psychologist involved in the assessment of the girl at the centre of the 'X case'. He currently sits on the Investigation Committee of the Laffoy Commission to inquire into child abuse.

And what about Eddie Hernon? He now lives in a small pensioners flat in north Dublin city. He has never received compensation for what happened to him.

"No-one puts food on my table," he says. So financially, he must continue to go out to work, doing what he knows best: construction. He gets on very well with his daughter Cherie and sees her quite often. It is telling that one of his most prized possessions is a family photograph of his son's family surrounded by an engraved mirror on which is etched phrases such as:

Fathers are a child's protector and hero;
He gives life to a dream;
A father is a child's best friend and role model.

Eddie Hernon has kept his sanity and kept his faith. Although having lost trust in institutions, and no longer practising as a Catholic, still he prays every day, dropping occasionally into a Catholic church to do so. There is a calendar of the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Perpetual Succour on the kitchen wall.

For such a physically small man, he has shown he is willing to make a stand not only for his own good name but as he points out, for all those who have been falsely accused of the abuse of children.