Updated Statement on the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy Sanction – Karen Woodall 2015.

Updated March 2018

Working with children and families where a child resists or refuses a relationship with a parent after family separation is both complex and risky for practitioners. Parents who are hurting and angry are often also highly litigious and the dynamics which cause alienation can often affect practitioners who do this work.

Many parents who do not like decisions that are made about their case by practitioners, will make complaints and seek to draw outside agencies into their disputes. Practicing in this field therefore requires clear boundaries and good governance. In 2012 I was a member of the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy, unfortunately the governance provided by this organisation was and is a cause for concern.

BACP have been criticised for their complaints procedure on several occasions. In a recent high court judgement the following criticism was made.

In The Queen on the application of Vesna Mandic-Bozic v British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy [2016] EWHC 3134 (Admin), the BACP was criticised by the High Court for its approach to dealing with a complaint against a member and prohibited from adjudicating upon it as it had already been authoritatively dealt with by the UKCP.

In this judgement of the High Court, Mostyn, J. launched a scathing attack on the BACP for the ‘dogged and obstinate’ manner in which it had proceeded against the claimant and criticised it for being “impervious to [the claimant’s solicitor’s] pleas to act reasonably and fairly”.

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You can read more about these criticisms in the judgement.

**Details of the complaint process and sanction.**

Psychotherapy is an unregulated profession and as such all membership of governing bodies is on a voluntary basis.

In 2012, a complaint was made about my work with an out of court case in which a parent was very angry with the decisions that I had made. Although I was not working as a therapist in this case, the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy of which I was a member, accepted the complaint which was made against me by this client. Whilst I wrote to explain to BACP to explain the nature of my work with the family, the closed nature of their complaints process meant that I was not responded at all by BACP during the complaints process.

BACP do not recognise parental alienation. Neither did they acknowledge at any stage during this process, the fact that I was not working as a therapist with the parent who made the complaint. BACP took three years to hear the complaint against me and during that time they did not extend even the courtesy of a reply to my emails in which I sought to determine why the process was taking so long.

When the complaint was eventually heard before a panel, none of the members of the panel had any experience of parental alienation. This is in direct contravention of their own ethical guidelines in which they state that a therapist has the right to be heard by a panel which is comprised of at least one person with experience in the same field as the person being complained about. I made submissions that I was being unfairly disadvantaged by BACP’s failure to provide someone with experience in the field I work in but these were ignored.

BACP has been recognised by some as having an unfair complaints process which lacks transparency and which is unjustly punitive. I would concur with this view of this body. During the period of time when I was going through the complaints process I was treated throughout as if I were guilty of all of the component parts of the complaint against me by the BACP complaints department. I was not responded to in any meaningful manner when I communicated with this team and they were, throughout, high handed and lacking in all transparency.

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Eventually, when the complaint was heard, three parts of a sixteen part complaint were upheld. These parts were as follows.

1. Using a document which belonged to the organisation I then worked for which omitted the words ‘per person’ from a statement.
2. Giving guidance to a parent which BACP said constituted an implicit contract for therapy (when therapy was not the purpose of the work being contracted for).
3. Making an assessment of the behaviours reported in a child, without seeing the child - which is something I regular do in my work in the family courts in complex parental alienation cases.

The sanction applied was as follows

1. To write a thousand word reflection on the parts of the complaint which were upheld.
2. To attend a training day on working with difficult people.
3. To write a thousand word reflection on the learning from the training day.

As part of their ‘judgement; against me, BACP applied the wording from the part of their ethical guidelines which they said the upheld parts of the complaint fell into. This wording states that a therapist is lacking in qualities to which they are encouraged to aspire. This is recognised as a punitive and unnecessary mechanism by some who are concerned about the BACP complaints process.

After a four year process, the sanction was lifted and the case closed. BACP then removed the information from its site in line with the guidelines from their ethical framework.

According to BACP, a sanction which is complied with and lifted means that it no longer exists. That does not prevent them from giving out the full judgement on the sanction however and if you require this, you can contact them here and receive a copy of it. Whilst it is bewildering that BACP states that a complaint and sanction ceases to exist when it is complied with and lifted, only to hand out the judgement when required, it is useful that they continue to do so as the sanction information was published on the internet by a source other than BACP who removed the sanction from their website in early 2016.

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Continued publication online of part of the sanction details

Part of the sanction details were published in 2015 by a man who promoted himself at that time as an expert in parental alienation. This man was supported by the charity Families Need Fathers. The publication of the most salacious parts of the wording of the judgement against me were a clear effort to sabotage my work. My solicitors requested that this publication was removed but this was refused. This information continues to be published and is clearly motivated by professional jealousy.

The sanction details which exist on the internet are out of context and do not include the facts of the case or the details of the sanction applied, which is entirely out of keeping with the wording automatically applied by BACP in all cases of an upheld complaint of any kind.

This can lead to parents using this information as a way of avoiding the involvement of the Family Separation Clinic in their case. The out of context information has been presented by resistant parents in several cases in 2016/17 although it did not result in the Clinic not being subsequently instructed.

To read the full details of the complaint, including the three parts which were upheld and the thirteen parts which were not upheld, plus the sanction applied and the way in which the wording about the sanction is arrived at by BACP, you can contact them on 01455 883300 explaining that you wish to have a full copy of the complaint and sanction against Karen Woodall which was made in 2012, heard in 2015 and lifted in 2016.

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