

Girl, 4, died after abuse that left her like car crash victim July 13, 2007 Times



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A four-year-old girl died after suffering sustained and systematic abuse that left her with injuries similar to those of a victim of a serious traffic accident, a court was told.

Sharon Wright, 23, and her boyfriend, Peter McKenzie-Seaton, 22, went on trial yesterday accused of murdering Ms Wright's daughter, Leticia, at their home in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire.

When ambulance staff were called to the house they found Leticia lying naked and lifeless on the floor. Her body was said to have been covered in bruises that suggested that she had been repeatedly punched or kicked. She had severe abdominal injuries and the back of her head was "like a boggy mass".

She also had bite marks, sores and cigarette burns, clumps of her hair had been pulled out and her blood was found on a wall and on a pair of handcuffs.

During the months before her death in November, neighbours had often seen the girl standing at her bedroom window in her pyjamas as if "keeping a vigil".

Nicholas Campbell, QC, for the prosecution, told Bradford Crown Court that the two defendants had moved to the house three months before the child's death. They received few visitors, the windows were rarely open and the curtains were usually closed.

"There was little evidence of a family life being lived beyond the closed door," Mr Campbell said. "One feature was noticed by a number of neighbours: the amount of time that Leticia spent in her bedroom. She could be seen on most weekdays standing in front of the closed curtain of her window looking out into the street."

Two neighbours were so concerned that they contacted social services, who discovered that the girl was registered with neither a local surgery nor a nursery. When two social workers visited in October, a month before Leticia's death, Ms Wright reluctantly took them to the child's room, the court was told.

"As far as they could observe, there were no marks on her," Mr Campbell said. The social workers later checked that Leticia had been registered at a local nursery, took Ms Wright's word that she had contacted a doctor's surgery and then closed their file on the case.

Leticia attended the nursery for only a week. Ms Wright told the school that her daughter was unwell, but the child was soon back at her vigil at the bedroom window. She was last seen at the window two days before her mother telephoned for an ambulance.

The child was pronounced dead in hospital less than an hour later. When Ms Wright was questioned by police, she said that her daughter had been “a little unwell” with diarrhoea and vomiting.

She claimed that she had given Leticia a bath that evening, wrapped her in a towel, then taken her downstairs to watch television. When she returned, she found her lying on the floor.

A pathologist found that the girl died from multiple injuries, mainly forceful blows to her head and abdomen that had been inflicted two or three days earlier.

“Such injuries are only associated with extreme trauma, the results of a major road traffic accident or perhaps a fall from a great height. They are not the result of everyday falls in the household,” Mr Campbell said.

Leticia also had cigarette burns to her thigh and foot and two bite marks on her arms. Her blood was found on her clothes, on the living-room wall and on a pair of fur-lined handcuffs that were retrieved from the kitchen. Clumps of her hair were found outside in a wheelie bin.

Ms Wright was arrested hours after Leticia’s death. Initially, she denied living with Mr McKenzie-Seaton, who was detained four days later in Northallerton, North Yorkshire. Both claimed that the child must have fallen while they were out of the room. They deny murder and an alternative charge of causing or allowing the death of a child.

The case continues.